

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

At the celebration of the baptism of infants, the rite begins with a dialog. The parents are asked about the name of the child, and then instructed that they have the responsibility of bringing the infant up in the practice of the faith. Then there's the question, "Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?" The ritual directs them to respond, "We do."

I'm sure they mean that when they say it, but I wonder who could possibly understand such a commitment!? It's similar to what a bride and groom vow during their wedding. They make a commitment for the entirety of their life, sight unseen. No one at that moment can anticipate with any clarity all they will go through in the course of an ensuing lifetime. That's true when it comes to baptizing a child, too. In spite of the hopes and dreams parents may have, the infant remains a mystery, and what is coming their way and what they will make of the commitment they have made is as unfathomable as God's imagination.

The second amazing thing at a baptism is that their child is anointed to be like Christ: priest, prophet and king. That's a lot of expectation to put on a 9-pound bundle of humanity.

So, what are we doing when we baptize our children or accompany adults through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults? What do we hope it will mean for them to be Catholic?

Just this year a book came out that argues that religion serves a vital purpose when societal life is very precarious. As populations arrive at the point of being able to take survival for granted, religion tends to fade into the background. To great extent, that seems to be the world in which we live, and that

poses the question, are we baptizing people into an increasingly irrelevant and disappearing tradition?

What would happen if we invited the three religious experts of today's readings to take a position on that statement? Ezekiel of Jerusalem, Paul of Tarsus, and Jesus of Nazareth's reflections portray the prophetic vocation as anything but a source of security.

The opening words of today's first reading demonstrate the precariousness of a prophet's life. Ezekiel says, "The LORD spoke to me and the Spirit entered into me." The minute that happens, a person can kiss their ambitions goodbye. The Spirit of God is not interested in advancing a prophet's preferred career or economic situation. The untamed Spirit of God has plans for humanity; prophets who accept the call to make those plans known will enjoy the same popularity as the Spirit who inspires them to speak. People with the will and power to protect their privileges will unite to reject and silence the prophets. Just ask Ezekiel, Paul, Jesus, the Rev. Martin Luther King, St. Oscar Romero and a host of others who allowed the Spirit to work through them.

St. Paul understood this from another angle. Obviously a highly successful preacher, teacher and mystic, Paul suffered from some disability he could not control, an unexplained defect that was public and embarrassing enough to humble him. It kept him aware that his gifts were not for his own benefit and that it was only when he relied on God rather than himself that he would be able to accomplish his mission. It is worth meditating on what it took for a proud, passionate intellectual to conclude that "when I am weak, I am strong."

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In today's Gospel, we hear about Jesus' first prophetic mission at home. As soon as he preached, the neighbors began to question his authority. Their response confirmed the fact that God can only give what people are open to receive. Unfortunately for prophets, their vocation is not to tell their people what they want to hear, but to remind them of God's hopes for them and for the world.

So, Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus might see the decline of the kind of religion that is tied to the clamor for security as a good and necessary thing. The message of these prophets had little or nothing to do with that. Rather than promote institutional religion, prophets call others to faith: faith in God, faith in themselves, and faith in the invincible power of self-giving love.

The the turn to God motivated by fear, danger and a search for protection and security, what Karl Marx called the “opiate of the people,” is confronted by Jesus who preached audacious faith. He calls his disciples to demonstrate that the reign of God is at hand. He invites us to risk co-creating a just and loving society. Jesus showed that the goal and ultimate joy of life is to live in union with God and one another, and that those who give their lives away will discover the fullness of life.

Instead of offering comfort and safety, our faith puts great expectations on us. Baptism calls each of us to be prophetic, priestly heirs of the creator of the universe. None of us can imagine what will be required of us if we respond to that call and it would be absurd to think we could fulfill that commission by ourselves. But according to Christianity we, vulnerable

bundles of humanity that we are, were created susceptible to God's indwelling Spirit and the power of Christ.