

**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B**  
**July 12, 2009**

**Readings: Amos 7:12-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-13**

**Poking and Prodding**

I saw a Newsweek magazine article on the internet yesterday. It was dated last Thursday (7-9-09) and entitled: *Without a Doubt: Why Barack Obama represents American Catholics better than the pope does*. It's a headline that made me stop and shutter. It's a headline we surely need to reflect on; on how so many Catholics in America share views on abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and homosexuality that are more similar to those of our current president than those of the official teachings of the Church.

And it made me think of some of the similarities between our country and the nation of Israel at the time of our first reading. Our first reading today was from the Book of the Prophet Amos. The twelve tribes of Israel were split into two separate nations. Northern Israel, which was commonly referred to as Israel, was becoming complacent and falling away from following the commandments and upholding the covenant. And God sent Amos from Southern Israel, from Judah, to call them to repentance and to warn them about the punishments God had in store for them if they did not heed his message. But Amaziah, the priest of one of the northern cities, didn't like this meddling from Amos; he didn't want to be reminded of the truth. He had his own professional prophets who told him that everything would be okay; they told him what he wanted to hear. And so, he tells Amos to go back home and prophesy in his own home territory and to leave him and the people alone. He tells Amos to go earn his bread by prophesying in Judah.

But Amos says to Amaziah: ***"I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The LORD took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel."*** In other words, Amos was a simple man. He didn't prophesy for money. He wasn't born into a family of professional prophets. He spoke the truth as commanded by God, not to earn money or as an occupation. But the prophets that surrounded Amaziah, though they may have been wise men, knew that they must tell him what he wanted to hear or else they would be dismissed and lose their income. How often do we surround ourselves with those who tell us what we *want* to hear instead of listening to those who tell us what we *need* to hear; like the Pope Benedict.

God called Amos away from his flocks to attend to God's flock. And God calls men and women from all walks of life to be His prophets and to proclaim the Good News. In our gospel story today, we see how Jesus sent out the 12 apostles to drive out demons and to heal the sick. But before they followed Jesus, before they were apostles, they were fishermen and tax collectors; being evangelists and healers was not their profession. They were called to minister to those who had gone astray, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus sent them to do His work and they obeyed because they recognized that He was God. They didn't do the Lord's work to earn a living.

Amos was a shepherd, and he was also a dresser of sycamores. We understand what it means to be a shepherd, but does anyone know what it means to be a dresser of

sycamores? Well first we have to understand that the sycamore referred to in the Bible is different than the sycamore trees we have here in North America. The tree in the Bible is the *Ficus sycomorus*, or mulberry fig. It is a relative of the fig tree with fig-like fruits, but the fruits are smaller and of lower quality than true figs. They were a fruit that was eaten by the poor. And to allow the fruits to ripen properly, so that they would be edible, the skin of the fruits needed to be punctured about four days before being harvested. And this work of puncturing the fruits was the role of the dresser of sycamores.

What is the significance of the fact that Amos was a dresser of sycamores? Why was this detail included in the story? Well, first, it supports the fact that Amos was from a poor community. Beside his work as a shepherd, he worked hard at a second seasonal job to help make ends meet. And, yet, when God called, he left everything, the little he had, to follow his calling, his vocation. It reminds us that God calls humble men and women to be His workers, not those admired by the world. It reminds us to continually reflect on how God is calling us to be at His service, even when we do not think that we have the necessary skills and abilities.

And second, Amos' job as a dresser of sycamores is significant because it implies that Amos was not the gatherer or harvester of the sycamore fruit. His role was simply to prepare the harvest; to disturb the fruit and allow it to ripen and mature properly. Others would be responsible for the harvesting. And that is much of what a prophet's role entails.

We all have different professions and occupations, but we are all called to be prophets as well. We need to go into our society, to our fellow Catholics in our own country, to those who are complacent about abortion, about embryonic stem cell research, about homosexuality, about helping the poor. We must remind our fellow Catholics that the ways of our country and its leaders are not necessarily God's ways. We must disturb the status quo, and, as if they were mulberry figs, we must poke and prod our fellow Catholics so that they mature in their faith a little so that their views are aligned more with Pope Benedict than with Barack Obama. We want a harvest that is pleasing to God. We do our part and then we pray, especially during this Year of the Priest, for holy priests who God calls in a special way to be laborers for the harvest. They will harvest the souls that we help to prepare.

**Deacon Joe Hulway**