

In the Sunday Liturgy during Ordinary Time, the first reading from the Old Testament is chosen because it is thematically related to the Gospel for the day. The Old Testament reading is intended to illuminate the Gospel's message. When I read the readings for today, I wondered, what light does the story of Amos shed on the story Jesus sending out his disciples?

Amos was just a shepherd. He was a simple man trying to make a living as best he could. Normally he was a herdsman but sometimes he had to augment his income as a shepherd by tending sycamore trees at harvest time. The sycamore tree in Palestine, unlike the American sycamore, is a fruit tree whose fruit needs to be pierced a few days before harvest to be useful. That's what Amos did when he was not shepherding.

Amos lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He was not a prophet, nor was he a member of the fraternity of prophets, and he did not have any training as prophet. Then, unexpectedly, God called him to go and prophesy to the rebellious Northern Kingdom of Israel just 40 years before its fall to the Assyrians. He was to call the people in the Northern Kingdom to repent of their sins or they would suffer exile. As we read, he was not well received by the priest, Amaziah.

I can identify with Amos. Back in 2007 I got an unexpected call from Father Carney when he asked me to consider becoming a deacon. My reaction was, why would you want a simple engineer, with no theological training and little scriptural scholarship, to step into the role of servant and preacher?

This can't be a good idea. But that is the way God works, he calls us to speak for him, not because we are qualified, but because of who we are and where we are.

With all this in mind, I better understood the light that was cast on today's Gospel by the story of Amos. Like Amos, the Apostles were also common men. They had no previous training in preaching or teaching and they weren't prophets or priests. Most of them were fishermen, just common men. Their call from Jesus to enter into the ministry was unexpected. And as we all know, like Amos, they were not well received by the Jewish priests of the time, who sought to silence them as they did Jesus. But look at what happened, because these twelve common men responded to God's call, they changed the history of the entire world.

Like Amos, we are all called to be prophets, even if we are common folks who have little or no theological training. Every baptized person is a prophet. Every baptized person is called upon to speak the word of God as the Apostles did. We have all received the same commission from Jesus as they did, "*Go ... and make disciples of all nations*".

In the today's Gospel we hear how Jesus wanted it to be done. Jesus told the Apostles not to worry about what they should take with them. They were to trust him to see to it that they had what they needed. And he did not promise that they would be successful, they were to speak for him to those who would listen and move on when they would not.

Our call to speak for God may be more important than ever in today's world. The Christian faith, although the foundation of Western Civilization and this country, is systematically being excised from our culture. It is a problem all over the world. Many people, especially our children, are falling away from their faith because that faith is no longer openly taught or practiced in our modern society. This is causing the collapse of moral and ethical values and threatens the fabric of our society. Even public figures and influential people have turned their backs on basic Christian values. Our culture has become openly sinful, like the Northern Kingdom of Israel back in the 8th century BC. Like Israel, modern society is rebelling against God.

How we got here is complicated, but I think it is largely due to a poor understanding of the Christian faith, even from within the ranks of devout Christians. Our efforts to pass on the faith to new generations have not withstood the challenges from secular society.

Saint John Paul the II recognized this problem. At the beginning of the third millennium he called for a New Evangelization. His inspiration was picked up by Pope Benedict XVI, and subsequently by Pope Francis, who moved to make the New Evangelization a reality. Pope Francis characterizes the New Evangelization as having three parts, first to *"inflammate the hearts of the faithful"*, second, to engage *"the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism"* and thirdly, to go forth and proclaim the Gospel to *"those who do not know Jesus*

Christ or who have always rejected him". Some are called to spread the Gospel to those who have never heard it, but most of us are called to evangelize those in our midst who have rebelled against the the teachings of Jesus. So how do we do this?

We can turn to today's Gospel to see how Jesus saw evangelization. We often think of Jesus' ministry as a teaching ministry, but it was more than just instructing his disciples how to live, it was focused on preaching the good news of repentance. That is, calling the people to turn away from their sinful ways and return to God. The good news is God's forgiveness. The teaching aspect of Jesus' ministry was, in part, helping people understand how their behaviors separated them from their God. In other words, to recognize and acknowledge their sins.

When we speak for God what do we say, how do we speak the word of the Lord to those who will listen? We can start by sharing what God has done in our own lives. We can model Christian behavior by following Church teachings even when it is inconvenient or difficult. We can look to the Bible, to the dogmas, doctrines and teachings of the Church for guidance. We can also look to the saints for guidance, how they responded to the call to be prophets for God.

It is not easy to be a prophet. Jesus knew that the Apostles preaching repentance would sometimes lead to rejection. He told them how to deal with these problems: *"whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them"*.

If people would not welcome them or listen them, they were to move on to those who would.

If we take up the challenge to be the prophets we are called to be, to evangelize the rebels in our society, we can expect that we will not be popular. Some people will find our words offensive or insulting. We will be opposed, and we can expect to be persecuted and hated by those who don't want to hear the call to repent.

But Jesus calls us to never give up if our attempts at evangelizing fail, but to move on and continue to preach the good news of repentance to all those who will listen and believe. We should always remember the wisdom of Mother Teresa who said: *"God doesn't require us to succeed, he only requires that you try."*

Today our world needs the Good News of the Gospel more than ever. The prophet Amos recognized that a call from God is something so imperative that no one should refuse it. May we have the wisdom to recognize this imperative and the courage to not refuse it.