

The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon



In light of the *new evangelization* in the Catholic Church I thought it would be helpful for us to revisit the prophetic aspect of diaconal ministry.

Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into oration about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. 1

These words of the renowned Jewish biblical theologian, Abraham Heschel, characterize the thrust of the message of the *classical prophets* of the Old Testament. Prophets were not much interested in speculative theological discussion. They were men sent with a message on behalf of Yahweh. However, prophets should not be understood as mere *voice boxes* for God. Prophets gave voice to the concerns of Yahweh through their own temperaments and creative modes of expression, often using poetry and lyric to communicate the great concerns of God.

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In contemporary media many seem to portray prophets as *seers* of future events. There is some justification for such an understanding of the prophets. However, on closer examination they appear as men of *insight* rather than foresight. While it is certainly true that the prophets speak about future possibilities for the people, both positive and negative, their chief concern was to tell the *truth* about the injustice and pain all around them. They *spoke truth to power*, pointing out the gross injustice of the social situations they confronted, often reinforced by religious practice that had separated itself from the demands of justice essential for faithfulness to the covenant between Israel and Yahweh.

The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions. 2

Remember the thundering words of the prophet Amos:

*I hate, and spurn you feasts,
I take no pleasure in your solemnities;
Your cereal offerings I will not accept,*

*nor consider your stall-fed peace offerings.
Away with your noisy songs!
I will not listen to the melodies of your harps.*

*But if you would offer me holocausts,
then let justice surge like water,
and goodness like an unfailing stream.*

Amos 5: 21-24

Prophets were the *gadflies* of their society for those who enacted unjust decrees and profited from the unjust situation. Prophets reveal the way God sees things to the people, especially to those in power, and reveal the very *pathos of God*. The prophet speaks to the suffering of God in those who are injured by the *social triage* structured into society by the wealthy and powerful and suffered by the poor and vulnerable. God will not have it! God will not stand by and watch lives destroyed by cruelty and injustice!

Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living; a crossing point of God and human beings. God is raging in the prophets words. 3

The God of the prophets will not be silent! This God takes sides against such injustice and cruelty and calls those who perpetrate it to repent, right now! The prophets propose an alternative vision to society from the dominant vision that gave rise to and supports the unjust status quo. The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, refers to the dominant definition of reality held by those in power as the *royal consciousness*. Such a consciousness tells everyone that all is well, that the only definition of things is the one they presently share in as a people. The prophets, on the other hand, have a *prophetic consciousness* that offers a vision of reality and society from God's point of view. It is not simply an alternative vision, it is God's alternative vision given expression through the words and actions of the prophets! **4**

Prophets used metaphors and symbols to reveal the injustice within the situation to open up the imagination to help others see that things can be different. Who could forget the prophet Jeremiah parading in front of the royal residence with a yoke around his neck denouncing the policies and practices of the king? Who could forget Jeremiah's unrelenting critique of the opulence of the royal residence and chiding the king to remember that to *truly know the Lord is to do justice?* (Jeremiah 22:13-16) Such things were typical of the prophets.

Dr. Brueggemann notes that certain features show up in the ministry of the prophet:

- He offers symbols that are adequate to the horror and massiveness of the experience which evokes numbness and requires denial of the pain and injustice around us.

- He brings to public expression the very fears and terrors that have been so long denied. It is the articulation of the pain of God in the pain of the people.
- He offers symbols that contradict the hopelessness of the present situation.
- His task is to provoke a *prophetic imagination* among the people and to bring to the surface the hopes and yearnings of the people that have been so long denied or suppressed that lead to change.
- He is called to speak of hope.5

The prophet's ministry is characterized by *criticism* and *energizing*. It is not enough for the prophet to hurl invective, he must also energize with the vision of hope that moves people to accept and to act on the new vision. For Christians the critique and energizing prophetic mission is grounded in and animated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Such a prophetic ministry has certain contours. This prophetic ministry has the Reign of God and the Lord's call to *metanoia* at its center. What's more, the *way* of this prophetic ministry will be the *imitation of Christ*, the way of service, in discerning how that ministry can be brought to bear on the *signs of the times*.6

The Reign of God initiated in Jesus Christ, and the promise of the Lord's return with the fullness of the God's Reign, sets up that *eschatological tension* between the already/not yet that moves the Christian Church through history to offer concrete acts of hope by working for a more just and peaceful world.

The deacon is called to a prophetic lifestyle by virtue of his baptism, sharing in the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and Leader, and his ordination. All of the baptized are called to prophetic ministry. However, the deacon serves as a special sign of the Lord's concern *for the least of these*. The deacon is an icon of the servant Jesus Christ who stands in a special solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. The prophetic ministry of the deacon will consist of a lifestyle of simplicity that rejects participation in the *cult of accumulation* by affirming the life of generous service that reflects trust in the Father of Jesus to provide what one needs to minister to the poor and vulnerable of this world.

....to stand beside the underprivileged, to practice solidarity with their efforts to create a more just society, to be more sensitive and capable of understanding and discerning realities involving economic and social aspects of life; and to promote a preferential option for the poor.... The prophetic significance of this so urgently needed in affluent and consumeristic societies, is its important witness in animating the diakonia of every Christian to serve especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted. 7

Such a ministry will utilize the great treasure trove of Christian hope in the resurrection that resists that which threatens and denigrates human life and creation. Resurrection faith directs Christian prophetic ministry in raising up before the world the belief that God is a God of life whose unconditional and sacrificial love, witnessed most clearly in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, is what transforms our world. Such a ministry will see things from the perspective of the *pathos of Christ* in those who suffer

in this world, especially those who are poor and without voice. The martyred German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses what happens when a Christian encounters and responds to the *pathos of Christ*;

...for once we learned to see the great events of world history from below; from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. **8**

In light of this new awareness, the deacon who exercises his prophetic ministry will bring the needs of the poor to his community of faith and to the larger community for redress. In doing this the deacon directs the gaze of the community to see the Lord in the poor and suffering and be moved with compassion to help make a more just and peaceful world in cooperation with others and God's grace. Such a ministry is the very stuff that constitutes the preaching of the Gospel.

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us to be a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel. **9**

This being said, what does a deacon do? That is a matter for great discussion that I hope will continue in the months ahead.

Notes

1 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York), Harper and Row Publishers, 1962, p. xiv.

2 Heschel, p. 10.

3 Heschel, p. 5.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1978.

5 Brueggemann, pp.44-61.

6 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965, #1.

7 *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, (Wash. D.C.) USCC, 2006, # 64

8 Kelly, et.al, *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Harper One, p. 5

9 *Justice in the World*, 1971, #16

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