

ZE09092304 - 2009-09-23

Permalink: <http://zenit.org/article-26945?l=english>

The Importance of Self-criticism and Humility

Biblical Reflection for 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 23, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The biblical prophet is one who has received a divine call to be a messenger and interpreter of the Word of God. The word that comes to the prophet compels him to speak.

Amos asks: "The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8). Jeremiah, despondent because of his unrelieved message of woe to the people he loved would stifle the word: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9). Whatever the form of the message, the true Israelite prophet's vision of God has permeated the manner of his thoughts so that he sees things from God's point of view and is convinced that he so sees them. Fundamental to the mission of the prophet is obedience to God's Word.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!

In today's first reading from Numbers (11:25-29), God sent the spirit of prophecy upon others who took Moses by surprise. Moses had earlier complained to God that he could not provide for Israel in the desert all by himself. To alleviate the situation, God promised to confer Moses' prophetic spirit on 70 elders. Even though Eldad and Medad were not present in the camp when God conferred Moses' spirit, they still received the gift and began to prophesy.

When Moses' aide, Joshua, wished to squelch the so-called rebellion against authority, Moses replies: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). Moses is pleased that the spirit of prophecy is shared with those not immediately present in the first commissioning of the elders. Joshua is upbraided for his jealousy. Spiritual authority can lead to serious abuses. It must be handled carefully, humbly and justly. The lesson is that God's ability to share the spirit is not restricted. God is the measure.

The present worthlessness of wealth

The severe denunciation of the unjust rich in today's second reading from the Letter of James (5:1-6) is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Amos 8:4-8). It is not intended to influence the rich to whom it is rhetorically addressed, but is rather a salutary warning to the faithful of the terrible fate of those who abuse riches and perhaps also a consolation to those now oppressed by the rich (James 2:5-7). The identical mode of introduction in 5:1-6 and 4:13-17 and the use of direct address throughout indicate the parallelism of the two sections. However, the present passage is harsher in tone and does not seem to allow the chance for repentance. In 5:2-3, the perfect tense of the verbs used (rotted, moth-eaten, rusted) probably indicate the present worthlessness of wealth. Furthermore, although silver and gold do not actually rust (verse 3), the expression used for them indicates their basic worthlessness.

ZENIT

This reading from James does not parallel the other two readings, especially in the matter of spiritual gifts manifesting themselves outside the immediate circle of Jesus' disciples. Nevertheless it offers hard words against the wealthy who abused their workers and withheld wages and insight into abuse of power. James is speaking explicitly of the secular realm of employment, salaries and just recompense for work. The author of James maintains that the rich have mistreated their employees. Since they withheld the wages that were due, their silver and gold will corrode and their garments will fall prey to ravaging moths. The wealthy have not realized that God is the God of the poor, and intercedes on their behalf.

Problems in Mark's Church community

Today's Gospel passage (Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48) is rather loosely put together and seems to reflect the problems of Mark's Church community. First there is the exchange between John and Jesus about the foreign exorcist (9:38), followed by Jesus' rejection of the elitism of the disciples (verses 39-40). In the second part (verse 41), anyone who gives the disciple a drink will belong to Christ; in the third part (verse 42), Jesus holds up the little ones as totally dependent on God, whom no one may lead astray.

There is a certain irony about Jesus' explanation of the disciples' action in trying to stop the foreign exorcist. In 9:14-29, the disciples, themselves, fail to exorcise an unclean spirit from a young boy and are sharply rebuked by Jesus. Now they want to restrain a successful exorcist simply because he is not part of their own group. The issue is clearly not whether the exorcist is acting in the name and power of Jesus, but whether he is part of their own chosen establishment. The exclusivist attitudes of the disciples are exposed for all to see. The success of the foreign exorcist is a threat to the status of the "official" disciples! Jesus answers with an inclusive word, and yet one that realistically recognizes the problem of unauthorized ministries (9:39). The disciples need to nurture the gifts of generosity and graciousness.

The need for self-criticism

In the second half of the passage, we find a miscellaneous collection of sayings that call for a stance of self-criticism. The disciples are directed to reflect on their own style of life and ministry. Do any of their words or actions serve as stumbling blocks for the children of the Church? Mark uses words of Jesus against scandal and the misuse of one's hands, eyes and feet. Jesus does not mandate mutilation. He has a typically Semitic way of speaking -- graphic, vivid, even exaggerated. Nothing, no one comes before Christ. Jesus' command to "cut it off" is not mutilation, but rather an invitation to liberation. It liberates us to love without reservation, not trapped in the self-love where everything and perhaps everyone, even God, himself, must revolve around me. The fascinating paradox of this story is this: The more we focus on the God who lives in us, on the people God cherishes in a special way because they are more needy, and on the earth that God saw as being "very good" (Genesis 1:31), the richer will be our delight in ourselves. Human life is a matter of relationships: with God, with people, with earth.

Despite its disjointedness, today's Gospel passage provides a strong antidote to the ever-present temptation to overestimate one's own position as the chosen of God. Human nature tends to be judgmental. Sometimes our inclination to judge results in elitism, concluding that others are not worthy of our company. We make difficulties, not thinking of others but blindly plunging ahead with feet, hands and eyes. We ignore God's consecration of our hands to work, of our eyes to perceive, and of our feet to walk God's special ways. We reject others as outsiders, foreign to our own ranks and status in life. Instead of questioning the validity of other active, and perhaps successful groups, we are reminded in graphic fashion of the importance of self-criticism and humility.

A final thought on humility

ZENIT

Jesus said, "Learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Most of the saints prayed for and manifested humility in their lives. Many of us live in societies and cultures that value self-promotion of worth, assertiveness, competitiveness, communicating our accomplishments if we wish to get anywhere and make a difference.

The virtue of humility is a quality by which a person considering his or her own defects has a lowly opinion of himself and willingly submits himself or herself to God and to others for God's sake. How can we strike a balance between being humble and meek, and assertive enough to succeed in the world today? Or do we need to sacrifice one for the other? In living just and upright lives, we can do a good job as a humble leader, but that is different from been able to succeed and being placed in greater positions of responsibility.

Mother Cabrini's humility

When I was growing up in an Italian-American household, we often heard stories of the saints and blessed from my grandparents and parents. Two Italians, of course, were at the top of the list: Mother Cabrini and Padre Pio. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850 - 1917) was the first American citizen to be canonized by the Church. As a child, Mother Cabrini's prayer for humility was given to us and I have kept it ever since in my Bible. The life of Mother Cabrini and the words of this prayer embody many of the thoughts found in today's Scripture readings.

"Lord Jesus Christ, I pray that you may fortify me with the grace of your Holy Spirit, and give your peace to my soul, that I may be free from all needless anxiety and worry. Help me to desire always that which is pleasing and acceptable to you, so that your will may be my will.

"Grant that I may be free from unholy desires, and that, for your love, I may remain obscure and unknown in this world, to be known only to you.

"Do not permit me to attribute to myself the good that you perform in me and through me, but rather, referring all honor to you, may I admit only to my infirmities, so that renouncing sincerely all vainglory which comes from the world, I may aspire to that true and lasting glory that comes from you. Amen."

* * *

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

--- --- ---

On the Net:

Salt and Light Catholic Television Network: www.saltandlighttv.org

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the [editor](#).