

I was thinking, the other day about elections for bishops - can't think why! In particular I was reflecting that when Bishop Warner announced that he was retiring at the 2005 Diocesan Convention everyone fell almost immediately to wondering who might be nominated to succeed him. One name from within this Diocese kept coming up, with people wondering in particular if this priest would even want to run. They wondered first, you'll notice, not about this person's qualities or suitability for the demanding ministry of a Bishop, but about the likelihood that anyone from within the diocese would wish to run. It's an accepted truth, you see, that running in an election in one's own Diocese has built-in disadvantages. Firstly, most people are likely to know you, you're familiar, your qualities are known, and while your good qualities will speak for you, it's also true that any weaknesses you have- and let's face it, we all have weaknesses -are also likely to be known. It's almost a case of "better the devil you **don't know** than the devil you know"!

So the phrase most often quoted about this priest among the other clergy came from today's gospel: "a prophet is not without honor, except in his own land....."

That's a phrase that gets used frequently, even by those who are not religious. It's used because it encapsulates so well the truth about the way we treat people we know. It reminds us that knowledge provokes reality- we know this person in a very real way, we can't escape the knowledge, and it must have the effect that all knowledge has- it changes us, whether we like it or not. And we tend to remember the negatives more frequently than we remember the positives. There's a story of a soldier during the first world war who, in a conspicuous act of gallantry, crawled out into no-mans-land and rescued 3 wounded comrades. In later years, at one of the reunions, all his commanding officer could remember was that he wasn't wearing the authorized uniform, having forgot his helmet, when he saved his friends' lives!

Familiarity seems to have the ability to drain the energy from our enthusiasm. Have you noticed, after a long Winter, that when Spring comes (last week, I think!!), and the green blush washes across the grey trees, and plants begin to burst from the ground, there's a conspicuous sense of newness, of birth, even of celebration. It's a time of veneration when all seems so wonderful. It's no coincidence that this is when we celebrate Easter, and Jesus' resurrection. But it isn't long before this "Spring triumph," this rebirth of nature, is overwhelmed by a sense of encroaching ordinariness. We quickly forget that what is now so green was, and will be again, cold, and grey, and dead. Our sense of awe has been emasculated by a casual familiarity, as if this greenness was always and will always be with us. The beauty of the earth fades into the background, like a discarded memory, and we remember only that the grass needs to be cut, or that, come the Fall, those green leaves will need to be raked up again. Our attention goes elsewhere, and it's mighty difficult to drag it back again.

This awareness of the effects of familiarity is why it took a lot of persuading from God before Ezekiel put on the Prophet's Mantle. And you might recall that it went for him much as you would expect- on one occasion, for instance, he ended up being heaved to the bottom of a well. He knew the truth of our phrase "familiarity breeds contempt."

And that's why, when Jesus shows up in the region that he called his home, and began to heal

and to teach, he was received less than enthusiastically. They knew him. Mostly they knew him as a contractor, a worker in stone and wood. And they knew his family, his mother and his brothers and sisters. His youth and background offended them, and his visible proclamation of the in-breaking of the reign of God threatened their way of life. It's difficult to be a prophet, to proclaim the power of God, when people know you, and when they don't like what you are doing or saying! Most of us know that from experience – from suggesting something that those who know us would rather not have happen – and we know the results. It's much easier to make an “ad hominem” attack on the person rather than deal with what they're proposing.

However: being a prophet is exactly what we are called to be. We must bring to that task an awareness that we are likely to be treated in exactly the same way that Jesus was treated, and therefore we should not lose heart at the response to our proclaiming. In fact, our expectation should be that our words and actions will most frequently be rejected.

But remember this, too: that even if our words and actions are rejected, the rejectors will still know that God's voice has spoken. Our faith tells us that one day that prophetic voice will take root.

In this task we can take heart in from today's Gospel, in which, you'll notice, Mark says: “and he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them!” Even on a bad day, all that Jesus could do was heal a few people! That strength is ours to be prophets of Jesus' Good News.

And there's another thing, too: Mark continues and points out that actually Jesus was able to continue doing remarkable things, once away from the doubters.

What that tells me is that the stories of Jesus' power also tell us that the listeners have to participate for God to be present and to act – community is central. It can't just be one person coming in, “working miracles” and then leaving. It requires all of us to work together for the greater good that is the Reign of God.

In a sense, it was easy for Jesus – he could just move on to places where no one knew him. It's harder for us because most often we'll do our proclaiming – verbal and in action – in familiar circumstances with familiar people. There are, most likely, no great missionary journeys in store for any of us. Our ministry as prophets, as those who proclaim God's reality, will be here among our own people and in our own land.

**But if we are to be prophets in our own community what are we to proclaim?** That's a particularly appropriate question to ask in this 4th of July Week, when we celebrate the birth of our own national community and culture. These readings have us reflecting on what it's like to be God's prophetic voice in the midst of this community and this culture. The founders of this country would encourage us to look at ourselves, just as they did at themselves, and ask ourselves at this time, “how are we doing?” and if the answer is “not well” then to declare loudly what is wrong and what can be done to put it right. That, in the context of our national life, is our “prophetic voice.”

So how are we doing? The answer is mixed. We enjoy a tremendous standard of living, but there are many in our country who are desperately poor. We have a judicial system which is the envy of many countries, but one that also appears to declare that money can buy better justice. We have a political system that, through its checks and balances, proclaims the power of the individual voter, and allows, at the same time, for the tyranny of minority groups- such as the National Rifle Association, or the Health care mega-corporations- to distort and undermine that power.

Two theologians, Dr. Stanley Hauerwas and Bishop William Willimon, have said this about some of the fruits of the Declaration of Independence: "What we are left with from the Declaration of Independence is not self-freedom, but self-centeredness, loneliness, superficiality, and hurried consumerism. Free is not how many of our citizens feel - with our overstocked medicine cabinets, burglar alarms, vast ghettos, and drug culture. Eighteen hundred New Yorkers are murdered every year by their fellow citizens in a city whose police department is larger than the standing army of many nations.....our culture has perverted liberation to mean freedom from the demands of others in order to follow the demands of self....the suffocating tyranny of American individualism in which each of us is made into his or her own tyrant." (Resident Aliens, pp 50, 153, 164)

In other words, what we have is not perfect. And it raises this question: Is there a life that we live that can be greater than "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness?"

The answer to this question is the answer to the former question, of what we should be proclaiming, and that is this:

There is a greater life, and that is in God. We are those people called to hear and speak God's prophetic voice. We find that greater life when we proclaim God's word and do the work God calls us to do in Jesus Christ. We proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified. We proclaim the love of God that does not discriminate, that is other-centered, that draws us into community together, and that values relationships over the soon-decayed "things" of our consumer society. If, as we say about each other and ourselves, "God is not finished with us yet," then we must say the same for our nation, proclaiming the good, and calling to the attention of all the bad and the indifferent. As we remember the great 4th of July not so long ago when this nation began this glorious adventure we must remember this.

So let us pray in the words from the Thanksgiving for National Life in the prayer book. Let us pray: "Help us, O Lord, to finish the good work here begun. Strengthen our efforts to blot out ignorance and prejudice, and abolish poverty and crime. And hasten the day when all our people, with many voices in one united chorus, will glorify your holy Name. Amen"