

HONOR RECONSIDERED

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus describes himself as a prophet. This tells us some important things about him; things of which we should remain aware as we do our best to follow him. Start here! Prophets, Jesus included, are in direct communication with God. God tells them what to do or say and they do or say it. This has already played itself out as we've been making our way through 1st and 2nd Samuel this summer. Three weeks ago, when the prophet Samuel anointed David as the rightful king of Israel, God was calling the shots and the prophet following orders. God told Samuel where to go and how to get there safely. One at a time, God told Samuel that David's seven brothers weren't to be the next king of Israel and that David was. Prophets receive the word of God directly and say or do what they're told to do or say.

Now generally speaking, God says two different things through prophets. There's the call to repent and the promise of better days ahead for the repentant. Maybe at the same time, maybe separately, God says through the prophet, "This or that sinful present is on its way out, but I've got a new and better future coming." The episode I've referenced involving the prophet Samuel is a case in point. As things get underway, God says to Samuel, "I'm done with Saul, Israel's first king. His sinful present isn't going to cut it. But David, David shall bring better days" This is how it goes with prophets. God communicates with prophets directly. They do or say as they're told. On God's behalf, prophets condemn sin, lay out sin's immediate consequences, and herald the divine grace that will build a future on a rock rather than upon sin's sinking sand.

That said, we Christians have an unfortunate tendency to focus on only one dimension of the biblical prophets' work—the part that finds prophets announcing God's grace to come in a new and better future. Given the way the New Testament often uses the Old Testament, it might be said that we come by this one-sided approach naturally. When the writers of the New Testament were doing their best to promote Jesus and the Church, they often connected Jesus and the Church to prophetic promises of forthcoming salvation to bill Jesus and the Church as God's promised and superior alternative to a sinful world. The examples of this are endless. Jesus is born of a virgin, receives the Holy Spirit on the day of his baptism, and dies on a cross because Isaiah said he would. Jesus is born in Bethlehem because this is how Micah said it would happen. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey because Zechariah said it would go down this way. When the Holy Spirit starts a worldwide, people-wide, generation-wide movement on the day of Pentecost through Peter and the other disciples, the Church is billed as the fulfillment of a prophecy made by Joel. It's often how it goes with the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and particularly, its prophets. It's all promise and no condemnation. It's all gospel and no law. Gone are the prophets' very regular communication on God's behalf that things are going to fall apart if we keep swallowing sin's bait hook, line, and sinker.

Sometimes, I think the absence of this critical feedback leads us to get too cozy with what I'll call the status quo. When all we're ever doing is citing how this or that prophecy has been fulfilled in Christ, it's not very long before it can seem as if God has cleaned up all that needed cleaning up in Christ and that God therefore no longer has much to say in the way of criticism and condemnation. But this isn't how it goes at all. Today's reading included, all throughout his letters to the Corinthians St. Paul is challenging his hearers to do it God's way rather than the world's way. Sometimes he calls God's way Christ crucified. Sometimes he calls it love. Sometimes he calls it a Church that has a meaningful place for everybody. Today he calls it power made perfect in weakness; learning to know that God's grace shall make much of our supposed weaknesses. This is all preaching and teaching that call others and us to change

our ways because this or that sinful present isn't going to cut it and is on its way out. One shouldn't expect anything less from a faithful follower of Jesus. Remember! For close to two thousand years now, the Church has called Jesus not just our king and our high priest, but also the most consequential prophet God has ever dispatched. And prophets don't just announce forthcoming salvation. They just as regularly call for change in us and our present. This is as true of Jesus as it is of any other prophet. Maybe it's time we start to look to Jesus not just to save us, but also to make us better in our here and now.

If this is to happen, we'll want to keep a close eye on our motivations in life. When Jesus returned to Nazareth in our reading from Mark, he didn't come back as a carpenter consumed with the goings on in a particular family. Something had happened to Jesus since he was last home. He was now preaching and healing. He would soon dispatch a small army of preachers and healers to bring God's word of warning and promise to as many people as possible. And quite importantly, Jesus wasn't going to be the least bit bothered if his former neighbors didn't approve of the change or understand the change, just as he had earlier been willing to part with his family of origin when they expressed concerns about his new agenda for life. Jesus was now operating out of a different playbook. He was playing life God's way rather than the world's way. His family, his former neighbors, the status quo, couldn't see the advantage in this new playbook. For them, it was weak and lacking in power and honor. But Jesus knew better. As is said in our reading from 2nd Corinthians and as befits someone who would one day be crucified, only to rise again from the dead, Jesus knew that power is made perfect in weakness.

The whole point of this saying first penned by St. Paul is that when our motivation in life is the wellbeing of all, rather than just the wellbeing of this or that small group, perhaps no bigger than ourselves and a some family and friends, we're going to win no matter the sacrifices and the temporary weaknesses involved. This is living God's way and as the prophets all announce God's way is going to win out in the end as this or that sinful present falls in upon itself. If we're just out for ourselves, all the prophets say, we're going to be weak in the end. But if we're willing to grow a little weaker so somebody else might grow a little bit stronger, then we're going to end up way stronger than our initial weakness or sacrifice would suggest. Again, power is made perfect in weakness. We're only as strong as our relationships. We can never have enough relationships. And relationships are kept strong when we're willing to grow weaker for their sake; when we're willing to make the personal sacrifices that keep relationships strong. This is power made perfect in weakness. It's the cross, weakness and sacrifice and suffering for others one day, and eventually resurrection to a new and better day. For the most part, power made perfect in weakness is the alternative and far superior lifestyle championed by all the prophets, including Jesus, and it works.

By way of example, a year ago Sequanota, our local Lutheran outdoor ministry, was in real trouble. The camp has no real savings, is heavily indebted, and would have to go without its primary source of income for a year because no campers would be coming to camp. Quite concerned about this, my wife Julia said it was time for us to do something. Making no reduction in our church offerings, we sent all of our stimulus money, all of our vacation money, and much of what was to be our entertainment money to Sequanota. A year later, Sequanota is still around and just hosted a day camp that attracted over eighty kids after advertising in just a couple of school districts. This is power made perfect in weakness, with many similar options more than available to you. In the end, our sacrifice, our weakening of our financial position for a time, did far more for Sequanota and the kids and families it serves than playing it close to vest ever could have done for Julia and me. With this in mind, may our question going forward often be: How might I decrease so God, good, and neighbor might increase? Amen!