



JESUIT
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Homily 15th Sunday – Year B

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There is a story told about a century or two ago that the Pope decided that all Jewish people should leave Rome. Naturally, there was a big uproar from the Jewish community that lived in Rome. So, the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. And if the representative from the community won the debate, the Jews could stay, and if he lost the debate, they would move out of Rome.

They decided to have this debate and the Jewish community looked around to find a champion of their faith. No one wanted to volunteer to do this. It was too risky. So, in desperation, they finally picked on an old man, who was considered wise, by the name of Moishe. He'd spent his life opening, and locking and cleaning the Synagogue. A simple old man. And he agreed but asked that there be one condition for this debate: that neither were allowed to talk during this debate. And the Pope agreed to this.

The day of this great debate came. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other on chairs for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed Moishe three. And Moishe looked back and raised just one finger. The Pope waved his hand in a circle around his head. And Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. And then the Pope pulled out a communion wafer and a glass of wine. And Moishe pulled out an apple. And then the Pope stood up and announced, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jewish community can stay in Rome."

An hour or so later, the cardinals get around the Pope because they want to know what happened, they asked the Pope. And the Pope said, "Well first, I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. And he responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then, I waved my hand around my head to show that God was all around us. And he responded by pointing to the ground, showing that God was also right here with us, in our midst. And then I offered the wine and a communion wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins in the Eucharist. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. I mean, he had an answer for everything! So what could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community called Moishe one side. They were amazed that this uneducated old man had won this debate. And so they say to him, "Can you tell us what happened when you were with the Pope?" And Moishe said, "Well, first he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of Rome. And I told him that not one of us was leaving the city of Rome. Then, he told me that the whole city must be cleared of the Jewish community! And I said, no, we're staying right here where we are now." "And then?" a woman asked him "what happened then?" Moishe said, "I really don't know". "He took out his lunch, so I took mine out." And then he said I'd won the debate. The Jews can stay!

That's a silly little story, but it says something to us about how we read signs. We see things that we often think we're on some common ground, but actually, we see a very different picture from our own viewpoint.

Amaziah, the high priest in that first reading, wants to get rid of Amos the prophet because the way that Amos sees things and how Amaziah sees things is completely different! Amos is an independent speaker of God's word, a former shepherd and tree-trimmer. God has called him to tend to the flock of leaders and trim their luxurious and unjust ways. He has been given three visions of the destruction of Israel, one of locusts, one of a drought, and one which shows Israel's complete collapse. He has begged the Lord to relent, and so God does, but the indulgent leaders of Israel have continued in their ways and have not repented. They have now made the temple an unholy place.

Notice how history repeats itself because leaders seem to do the same thing over and over again. Amaziah is a priest of the false sect of Bethel, and he tells Amos to get out with his false visions and predictions. He does not like the way that Amos says things – Amos, of course, does predict a few nasty things about Amaziah's own wife: to be reduced to being a street-walker and her children, he says, banished from the land and that he, Amaziah will die away from the land of Israel.

There are two very different world-views at work. That of the leaders of luxury and empowered as they think in many ways to do as they please, and Amos who speaks the values of God's kingdom.

In the Gospel, Jesus suggest that there are three, for lack of a better word, "visa" requirements for his apostles – specific things they need to realise before they can travel: simplicity of life, dependence on others and their hospitality (notice they don't need a Covid test or a vaccine to travel.) What do we learn from Amos and Jesus instructing his apostles? Because Jesus' instructions, too, are contrary, different, to what we would expect. I want to suggest that there are a few invitations for us today.

1. Freedom from externals

The first one is to try and free ourselves from externals. In our desperate need to be effective, to look good, to be successful, we hang on to all sorts of things – materially, and psychologically, and emotionally – we think that these will somehow give us the edge or make us shine - things that we hang on to. Amos and Jesus speaking to his apostles needed little of anything, material, or psychological or emotional, to hang on to because they knew what they had was inside them. They knew that what they had came from that store within them. The authority they had received was inside them, that authority that God had given them. They knew that they, without any external trappings, were the message.

And perhaps that's the invitation to us, to ask ourselves, how can I be the message? What might be a hindrance to me truly being the incarnation of God's message to others? Does my desperate need to look good or associate with certain people hinder me from really being the message? The person who I am, knowing that I have enough inside me because that's where God reigns in the depths of my heart.

2. Bringing life to others

The second invitation is one about bringing life to others. Amos was interested in how God was calling Israel back to life – they had completely lost their way. Jesus, too, was interested in the healing and the recovery of people who were burdened. He sends His apostles out to those who are burdened, those who need healing. In both readings, we see an intervention,

a confrontation, a direct honesty from the prophet Amos and from what Jesus asks His disciples to do.

These are all difficult human interruptions and most often, the experience of casting out demons and bad spirits is not what we think it is. When we are freed from being overly concerned about our own possessions, our image, and our success, we are freed to be concerned about how intervention and confrontation and direct honesty will bring life to others.

As with the Apostles, we are invited in our relationship with Jesus to go and confront what is not life-giving so that others may have life. This is not difficult to see in our own context, where we often see many actions, many decisions by those in leadership that are not life-giving to others but rather simply about themselves. And so we are invited, first of all, to confront ourselves, to ask ourselves what we need to let go of, so that we are not diminished, but rather can give life to others.

3. Reading the signs – in our lives and those of others

The third and final invitation is about reading the signs of the times, in our own lives but also our own context. Amos and Jesus and those apostles were able to “read the signs of the times”. And reading the signs of the times is not where it stops, because once we read the signs of the times, we need to recognise that we have responsibility. As much as we find it difficult, we, disciples of Jesus, God’s people, are also God’s instruments. Amos, and Jesus and those apostles that Jesus sends, knew that they were God’s instruments. We must be convinced that others will not be able to achieve what God wills them to achieve without our response. Therefore, we need to read the signs of the times and take responsibility for what it is that we see.

The instructions that Jesus gives to the disciples, if you go and spend time reflecting on them, speak of our interconnectedness, dependence, and hospitality. Only when we are truly concerned about others and their fate – the poor on the street corners or beggars at the gate, an economic system that constantly keeps people out, an education system that is failing the vast majority of young people in this country – can we truly say that we are on mission with Jesus – wearing the sandals of the pilgrim, carrying no spare tunic. Then we are freed from pretence and holding the staff that reminds us of our real and only need, and that is to rely on God who sends us.

Our responsibility or our ability to take responsibility for our context is what is important. Moïse and the Pope see things in that story very differently.

We, the people of God, are invited to see ourselves and the world in which we live differently to simply the “common” way of seeing things, the “fashionable” or “conventional” way of seeing things. And when we see things differently, we do not simply just accept the status quo, but rather we pray for the grace to be freed from externals so that we can really bring life to others and that we can read the signs of the times in our own lives and those of others - signs which help us to know how best we can respond and take responsibility now for the reign of the Kingdom of God.