30. June 2022

Respect God's authority

Am 7:10-17

Amaziah the priest of Bethel then sent word to Jeroboam king of Israel as follows, 'Amos is plotting against you in the heart of the House of Israel; the country cannot tolerate his speeches. For this is what Amos says, "Jeroboam is going to die by the sword, and Israel will go into captivity far from its native land." 'To Amos himself Amaziah said, 'Go away, seer, take yourself off to Judah, earn your living there, and there you can prophesy! But never again will you prophesy at Bethel, for this is a royal sanctuary, a national temple.' 'I am not a prophet,' Amos replied to Amaziah, 'nor do I belong to a prophetic brotherhood. I am merely a herdsman and dresser of sycamore-figs. But Yahweh took me as I followed the flock, and Yahweh said to me, "Go and prophesy to my people Israel." So now listen to what Yahweh says: "You say: Do not prophesy against Israel, do not foretell doom on the House of Isaac!" Very well, this is what Yahweh says, "Your wife will become a prostitute in the streets, your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, your land will be parcelled out by measuring line, and you yourself will die on polluted soil and Israel will go into captivity far from its own land!"'

The prophets have to say what God commands them to say! They are God's witnesses; they are his voice, and they are the ones who are to remind the people and their leaders of the Lord's demands.

In today's reading, we hear about the conflict Amos faced because he was called by God to speak to the people as a prophet. His words did not correspond to the wishes of the king or those who ministered around him, most notably the priest Amaziah of Bethel. The words of the prophet Amos are unbearable for them, and they accuse him of conspiracy against King Jeroboam.

Unfortunately we have to note that this reaction is often repeated: They do not want to hear the truth, especially if it is an unpleasant truth, which does not correspond to their own desires and expectations. Instead of taking it as an opportunity to convert and to seek unity with God, the messenger of truth is often persecuted and viewed with suspicion.

Amos should no longer prophesy in Bethel, and the reason given by the priest Amaziah unmasks the profound paradox: He argues that Bethel is the sanctuary of the king and the house of the kingdom, and it turns out that in the temple of the Lord what corresponds to his will should no longer resound, but that only what pleases the ears of the earthly authorities should be proclaimed.

Today's text shows us a very serious reality. The authority of God is to be undermined, so that it is practically subordinated to political power. We must bear in mind that this temptation has existed since the fall of the angels, for Satan wanted to exercise dominion himself, thus substituting himself for the authority of God.

This same pretension manifests itself when governments attempt to limit freedom of worship, thus abusing their power. This abuse is clearly evident when there is even persecution, as we know is the case in some countries. But also where, even if religious practices are not forbidden, they are to be relegated to the private sphere, an act of injustice against God's authority takes place.

Apart from these obvious forms of restriction, there are more subtle and indirect ones: For example, when, in view of 'political correctness', a clear moral stance is no longer tolerated in the public sphere and, with the support of the media, is simply branded as "backward" and "old-fashioned". As a result, the voices of prophetic correction, which want to convey God's point of view to us, are increasingly being silenced. In this way, God's authority in this world is being undermined.

The great voice of prophetic correction for the world is the Church. She is not only the light of the world, but also the salt of the earth (cf. Mt 5:13-14). Salt represents the truth, which is to be proclaimed "in season and out of season" (cf. 2 Tim 4:2). The Church can never fail to bear witness to the truth, or to silence God's demands.

Today's text is a stark illustration of what will happen to the priest Amaziah if he stands in the way of the prophet. His actions were particularly serious because, being a priest, he should have acted as God's representative, rather than opposing his word with the authority of a king.

We should not think that today the consequences of undermining God from exercising his authority would be less serious. Rather, we should reflect on the misfortunes that may befall mankind as a result.