

'Rookie prophet' incites a riot

THE GOOD NEWS

GOD'S WORD IN EVERYDAY LIVING

By Father Paul Turner



HIS FIRST DAY on the job, Jesus incites a riot and a lynch mob (Lk 4:21-30). If a preacher's first homily creates that kind of reaction, we're looking at a rocky career.

What did he say? Why would the crowd get so angry? All Jesus did was compare his ministry to two episodes from the earlier Scriptures--a story about Elijah, and one about Elisha. What upset them was not the comparison that he made, but the one he did not make. Jesus compared himself to a prophet. No big deal. Prophets were common enough. However, he did not compare the crowd to the people who benefitted from the prophets' ministry. Now, that made them angry.

You can find these stories in your Bible. Dig out the first book of Kings, chapter 17, verses 1 to 16. It's the first of many a charming story about Elijah. Elijah is probably the most popular prophet without an entire book named after him, a Bruce Springsteen with lots of hits, but no number one. He makes his debut by walking up to the king, Ahab, with a snippy prophecy. Ahab, we learn a few verses earlier, ruled Israel for 22 years and "did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all (the kings) who were before him." OK, he deserves a snippy prophecy. Elijah predicts a drought which will only end when he says so. So there.

MEANWHILE, in the midst of all the suffering this drought brings to the people of Israel, the word of the Lord inspires Elijah to go visit a widow in Zarephath. Elijah sweet-talks her into some food and drink, even though she claims to be on her deathbed. As a reward, she gets a miraculously unending supply of food and drink. Neat miracle. Shock-

ing, though, because this woman (Oh, horror of horrors!) is a Gentile! She's not a Jew, not part of the chosen people. And this freshman prophet rescues her from the famine!

A similar surprise accompanies the story from 2 Kings 5:1-14. Elisha, the prophet who succeeded Elijah, found himself in the service of the king of Israel. One day the king gets a letter from the king of Aram, an enemy, who announces he's sending his best warrior along, Naaman. The reason? Naaman has leprosy, and the king of Aram has heard that the king of Israel has a prophet who can cure him. Would the king please cure his warrior and send him home?

This really stresses out the king of Israel, who figures it's all a setup, a ruse to fight another war. However, Elisha convinces the king to let him give it the old college try. Naaman arrives with an entire retinue and stations himself outside Elisha's front door, expecting to be given some elaborate instructions. Instead, Elisha tells him to go jump in the Jordan River. Seven times.

Now Naaman is upset. Came all this distance for this silliness? He leaves in a huff, until a servant convinces him to try it. You never know....

SURE ENOUGH, Naaman comes up clean. The significance? This is the only leper that Elisha cures. And he's Aramean, not a Jew.

So, when Jesus compares himself to the prophets in these two stories, he creates jealousy in his Jewish audience. He essentially announces that he's come to cure the world, not to be a privately contracted prophet. Ancient Israel wanted their own Messiah, and they got angry at the thought of having to share a prophet. Better to have him dead than helping the enemy. So they start a riot.

Way up here in the front of Luke's Gospel, long before the full story gets underway, Jesus has already run for his life twice--from Herod when he was an infant, and from his own home town as an adult.

However, he risks his life for this purpose, to announce that the favors of God are for the poor, the oppressed, the immigrant, the in-law, the boss, the homeless, and even the rich. Not just for you or me.

Father Paul Turner is pastor of St. John Francis Regis Parish, Kansas City. □

Daily Scripture Readings

Third Sunday

In Ordinary Time

Sunday, January 22

Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

Psalms 19:8-10, 15

1 Corinthians 12:12-30

Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Monday, January 23

Hebrews 9:15, 24-28

Psalms 98:1-6

Mark 3:22-30

Tuesday, January 24

Hebrews 10:1-10

Psalms 40:2, 4, 7-8, 10-11

Mark 3:31-35

Wednesday, January 25

Acts 22:3-16

Psalms 117:1-2

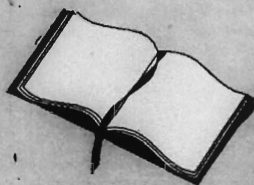
Mark 16:15-18

Thursday, January 26

2 Timothy 1:1-8

Psalms 96:1-3, 7-8, 10

Mark 4:21-25



Friday, January 27

Hebrews 10:32-39

Psalms 37:3-6, 23-24, 39-40

Mark 4:26-34

Saturday, January 28

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

(Ps) Luke 1:69-75

Mark 4:35-41

Fourth Sunday

In Ordinary Time

Sunday, January 29

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19

Psalms 71:1-6, 15-17

1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13

Luke 4:21-30