

# The 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Amos 7:12-15
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 1:3-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our hearts, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 6:7-13

The 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B picks up immediately after the rejection of Jesus by the people of his hometown, and this story is about the call of the 12 apostles. It's a brief episode from Mark's gospel, but obviously a very important one, with regard to the question of did Jesus found the church and what was the structures of authority that he gave to the community of disciples that he was going to leave in his wake after his passion, death, resurrection and ascension. So let's look at this passage with the apostolic origins of the church and the structure of the church in mind. Mark 6:7 says this:

And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out

many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so there are a number of aspects of this brief text that are worth highlighting. First, number one, the idea of vocation. Notice that it does not say that the 12 apostles chose Jesus but that he called them, that he chose them. So from the very beginning he is the one who initiates that call for them to become men who are set apart for his particular mission. So we have the kind of idea of the call of the 12 apostles here; that will be expressed in John's gospel in a different setting when he'll say to the apostles, "you did not choose me but I chose you," right, the idea of an election, that God through Christ chooses them from all time to have this special mission, that's the first point.

The second point is the very idea of apostleship or mission. You can't see it, it's hidden in English here but when it says that Jesus began to send them out two by two, the Greek word for send out is *apostellō*, from which we get the noun *apóstolos*, which is, of course, the kind of loan word into English of the word apostle. So apostle literally means in Greek one who is sent out, right. So you can see another aspect of the apostleship of the 12 here; they aren't chosen to just be Jesus' special friends or special companions, their mission is always outwardly oriented. They are sent out by Christ to bring the good news to the world. That's ultimately what being an apostle is all about. However with that said, in bringing the gospel to the world they're bringing it to a world that is under the power of sin and under the power of Satan. So another aspect of their apostleship that we tend to forget about in modern times, but which was extremely important at the time of Christ, was their authority over the demonic. So it says here that Jesus gave them "authority over unclean spirits." The Greek word for authority there, *exousia*, can also be translated as power, right. So Christ, think about this, is giving these 12 men, some of whom are fishermen, one's a tax collector, he's giving them authority over the unclean spirits, who in a biblical perspective are equivalent to demons and also the equivalent of fallen angels. So we can already see here that this Jesus is no ordinary man and his apostles are no ordinary students because he's giving them

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

essentially power over fallen angels, right. This is something that's stunning, it's remarkable. He's investing them, in a sense, with his own divine authority and his divine power over the demonic and over the fallen angels of the world.

Now in that context, another aspect (number four) stands out, which is the poverty of the apostles, or the simplicity we might call it. Because what he tells them is that on their journey they're to take nothing except a staff and they're not to bring any bread or a bag or money in their belts, and not to put on two tunics. So basically what he's saying is don't worry about food, don't take any bread with you. Don't worry about expenses, don't take any bag or any money, so no money purse, nothing that you would normally take with you on a journey. They are allowed to wear sandals and to bring a staff with them, this is basically a walking stick that would be common in that day, but in other words they're to embrace simplicity. They're going to go out into the world, they're going to travel with nothing but the clothes on their back, the staff in their hand, and the sandals on their feet as an act of complete trust that God's going to provide. God will provide whatever financial needs they may have. God's going to provide whatever food and drink they may need in the course of their journey. They're going out in complete simplicity and trust in dependence upon God's providence to guide them in their mission of proclaiming the gospel.

With that said then a fifth aspect of the text that is fascinating is that this is really our first glimpse at what evangelization looks like during the public ministry of Jesus. I mean Jesus himself is of course the great evangelist. He's the great proclaimer of the good news but he never intended to be the only evangelist or the only proclaimer of the good news. And so while there's a lot of talk in our day and time about the new evangelization and the church's mission to evangelize, it's important to always compare what we do today with what the apostles did in their own day. In this first proclamation of the gospel it's going to be an experience in which they encounter both acceptance and also rejection, and Jesus instructs them on how to deal with both responses. So he says if you enter a house, wherever you go, stay there, so they're not to bounce around they need to stay in one place at a time and receive the hospitality that is given to them. However if they are rejected, in other words if they are unwelcome rather than welcome, Jesus says that the response that they are to give is this: shake off the dust that's on your feet as a

testimony or a witness against them. And this is a fascinating aspect here. Basically what Jesus is telling the apostles is, you have a duty to proclaim the good news but once that good news is proclaimed and people have rejected it, you need to move on and bring the gospel to some other place. So there's a real fascinating gravity about the proclamation of the gospel by an apostle and also a responsibility on the part of the apostle to not linger where they're being rejected, but to move on and bring it to as many people as possible, and to basically stand in judgment over the places that reject them. We'll see that this is modeled on Jesus' own method of evangelization. If you go back early in the Gospel of Mark he doesn't stay in one town, he doesn't stay in one place for very long. He goes, he preaches, he gives the people the opportunity to accept or reject, and once the town either accepts or rejects him he moves on to another place because he needs to bring the gospel to as many people as possible during the time of his public ministry. And so we see the apostles obey Christ, they go out and it says that they preached that men should repent.

That's a nice summary statement of the essence of evangelization, and I think it's really important to highlight this. In one of his recent magisterial documents, Pope Francis wrote an apostolic exhortation called *The Joy of the Gospel*, you know you can actually translate it the joy of evangelization, the joy of proclaiming the good news. And one of things Pope Francis said is that we need to go back to the *kerygma*, the idea of preaching. That we don't just do catechesis, which is instruction, but we also need to preach. We need to proclaim the good news to everyone especially to those who haven't heard it. And that word he uses in the document, *kerygma*, is actually a Greek word from this verse. When it says they went out and preached, the Greek word there is *kēryssō*, from which we get the noun *kerygma*, which means proclamation or preaching. And so what's fascinating about this text is, notice that the essence of Christian preaching, the heart of it, is the call to repentance. John the Baptist came up, arose, it says at the beginning of Mark's gospel, he preached a baptism of repentance, turning away from sin and turning to God. When Jesus comes up the first word out of his mouth is repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That message of John and that message of Jesus is going to be the same message of the apostles. The first issue that has to be dealt with whenever you're proclaiming the gospel is calling people to turn away from a life of sin and to turn their hearts and their minds to God. And I just think that's a

powerful reminder for us in the modern day and era. We can sometimes forget that we don't just have to catechize people, we also have to preach the good news of repentance. Because repentance, although it sounds like a bad word in our language, is actually a good thing. The Greek word for repent, *metanoéo*, or *metanoia* is the noun repentance, literally means to change your mind, like to change your way of thinking, to turn away from sin and to turn to God. That's always a good thing. That is good news, that we can turn away from sin and begin to change, lead lives that follow the path of God, that follow the path of Christ. And that was the essence of the early Christian gospel: repentance from sin and turning to God.

So in the context of that evangelistic preaching notice something else, the apostles don't just proclaim the word they also give people motives of credibility. They give people reasons to believe that they actually were sent by God and have the word of God in two key ways. First, through their exorcistic ministry by casting out demons and then second through their healing ministry by anointing people with oil and healing the sick. So notice here, Jesus gives the apostles not just his power over the demonic, he also gives them his power over sickness and over suffering, and he equips them with supernatural graces to carry out his healing ministry. So exorcisms, preachings, healings, these are always part of the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. That's part of the apostolic gospel and the apostolic shape of evangelization. Alright so that's it, it's a short passage but you can see Mark is always packed, there's always so much we can talk about.

Now with that in mind we can go back to the Old Testament reading. So let's turn there for a moment. The Old Testament reading for today is from the prophet Amos and it's another example of the church giving us a prophetic story of the call of the prophet or the commissioning of the prophet. So one of the things you'll notice in the lectionary is that whenever we read from Ezekiel, Isaiah, or this case Amos, the church will frequently select the passage from that book that tells you about how the prophet was commissioned by God, how he was called by God to be a prophet. And in this case we don't have an account of that story but we have Amos himself referring to how he was called by God and what was the purpose of his mission. So let me just again put this in context. I think if you ask most Catholics who was Amos, they might know he was a prophet but they might not know when he was a

prophet or what kind of mission he had, what exactly was his, you know, distinctive characteristics amongst the different prophets of the Old Testament.

So in this case Amos is one of the earliest of the prophetic books. He is an Eighth Century prophet. He is writing around the time of the Assyrian exile of the Northern kingdom of Israel, so that took place around 722 B.C. it's in the Eighth Century B.C. Now Amos himself is not a Northerner, he's from the South. He was a shepherd, he was a dresser of sycamore trees as we'll see him say a little bit later. And so he wasn't a prophet by trade. He was a Southerner, a simple person but he's called by God to go up to the North and to prophesy, to warn the Northern tribes who were in a state of idolatry and sin at that time, that if they continued to sin they were going to be cast into exile, they were going to be deported from the promised land by the Assyrian Empire. And so the passage that the church gives us here is an exchange between Amazi'ah, who was a priest of the North, and Amos, who was a prophet from the South, and basically Amazi'ah is telling Amos to get out and to shut up and to stop prophesying against the Northern kingdom. And this is what the scripture tells us. The reading begins in verse 12, it says this:

And Amazi'ah [that's the priest] said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Then Amos answered Amazi'ah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

Okay so what's this basically saying? In essence, Amazi'ah, who is a priest at the sanctuary in Bethel, this Northern kingdom who, remember, splits off from the Southern kingdom back in 922 B.C. — there was like a civil war, a civil breaking of the kingdom of Israel into two kingdoms: the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah — and so what Amazi'ah's saying is look, go back to the South, go back to the Southern kingdom, you can preach there but don't preach here anymore, you know, take your words elsewhere. And Amos responds to him by saying look, I'm not a professional prophet, I'm not the son of a prophet, I'm just a shepherd, right. I follow the flock, I'm a dresser of sycamore trees, so he

works with sycamore trees. But he himself was called by God to come to the North and to preach. So Amos' point is you can't tell me where to go or what to do because a higher authority has called me to this mission of prophesying to the Northern kingdom. I think the reason the church picks this for today is because it wants to juxtapose the call of Amos the shepherd to become a prophet of God in the Old Testament with the call of the disciples, some many of whom were simple fishermen, to become the prophets of God in the New Testament, to become the men who will go out and bring the good news of repentance and salvation to the ends of the Earth in their apostolic mission given to them by Christ.

And in that context the Psalm for today acts as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. It's not as directly related as some other Responsorial Psalms are but it's basically about the fact that God is faithful and that he will bring salvation to his people. So Psalm 85:9 it says:

Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.  
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
Yea, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
and make his footsteps a way.

So this is just kind of a general declaration, a beautiful very poetic one, about the fact that God's salvation will come; that he's a merciful God, he's going to bring truth, he's going to bring justice, he's going to bring salvation. Of course ultimately that's going to be fulfilled in the proclamation of the gospel in the New Testament, beginning with Jesus himself and then through the apostles and their evangelistic mission.

Now with all that said, one last point that I'd like to make is from the living tradition, and it has to do with a little detail that you might easily miss in the

gospel, but which is really pretty significant. If you go back to Mark 6 and you look at that last verse from the gospel you might have noticed this that it said, not only did the apostles preach, not only did they cast out demons, not only did they perform miracles, but it also says that they anointed with oil many that were sick. And this verse is really significant because it's only found in the Gospel of Mark. Only the Gospel of Mark tells us that part of the apostles evangelistic activity was to anoint people with oil. And the reason this is important is because it is an anticipation of the anointing of the sick, which is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. And in fact if you look at the living tradition of the church, it's fascinating at the time of the Protestant Reformation, right, in the 16th Century, one of the things that many of the Protestant reformers did was reject the seven sacraments. They did this in various ways. Some of them said well there are only two sacraments: baptism and the eucharist, right. Others said no, baptism, eucharist, and matrimony — marriage was a sacrament. There's a lot of debate about what exactly are the sacraments, which ones were instituted by Christ, that kind of thing. But there was a widespread rejection of the sacrament that was then known as extreme unction, the anointing of the sick. And to this day the vast majority of Protestant ecclesial communities, as well as communities that derive from the Protestant Reformation, do not practice the anointing of the sick or do not practice anointing the sick with oil. In fact, many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, who are in the Protestant tradition, would actually point to the anointing of the sick or the use of oil as kind of like a superstitious or magical kind of practice and something that they reject. The irony is that the practice of using oil in anointing the sick as a sacrament is something that goes back not just to the New Testament, but to the apostles themselves.

And so I didn't mention this but although the Revised Standard Version says that they anointed with oil many that were sick, the actual Greek word there is they anointed with *elaion*, literally they anointed with olive oil many that were sick. So not just any kind of oil, it's olive oil. And what's significant about that is that of course is the kind of oil that we use to this day in the Catholic Church. Not just in the anointing of the sick but also in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation and holy orders; all the sacraments that involve any kind of anointing, we use olive oil because that's what the apostles used who were commissioned by Christ to include this anointing as part of their evangelistic mission. So I think it's important



to highlight here that the Council of Trent, which took place in the 16th Century and which defined the church's doctrine of the seven sacraments, pointed to our gospel reading for today, Mark 6, as one of the biblical foundations for the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. So I'll be quoting from this text here. This is called the *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, edited by Heinrich Denzinger. This is kind of like the official church compendium of all the church's major doctrines and dogmas. It's frequently cited in the Catechism as DS, Denzinger, and in this case in Denzinger we have a quote from the Council of Trent. This is what it says:

“This sacred anointing of the sick was instituted by Christ our Lord as a true and proper sacrament of the New Testament. It is alluded to indeed by Mark [cf. Mk 6:13], but is recommended to the faithful and promulgated by James the apostle and brother of the Lord: “Is any among you sick?” he says, “let him call for the elders [presbyteros] of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” [James 5:14-15]

And the Greek were there for elders, the Council of Trent points out, is *presbyteros* and that's from which we get the English word priest. So the Council of Trent in the year 1551 A.D. points out that the sacrament of anointing of the sick has its foundation not just in the Letter of James, which is really explicit about anointing with oil, but also in the apostolic practice of anointing the sick with olive oil in Mark 6. So I just bring this up because I think it's one of those, for me, very important texts in the gospel that point to the apostolicity of the Catholic Church. In other words, if you look around at the many many different denominations today, the vast majority of Christians do not practice the anointing of the sick, right. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox are known for this practice of anointing, of using the anointing and chrism. And yet, despite the fact that the vast majority of Christians, Protestant Christians, who would root their own belief in scripture and even say that they believe in the Bible alone, they don't actually follow this not just biblical, but this apostolic practice of using oil in the context of sacramental healing and the sacramental forgiveness of sins that is mentioned not just by Mark but also by the Letter of James 5. So for me it's just one more sign of the fact that when we say we believe in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church, it's important there to highlight that word apostolic. That the Catholic

Church isn't just Catholic in the sense of being universal or global, it's also apostolic in that it's rooted in the preaching and the teaching and the activities of the apostles themselves, including this distinctive practice of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.