

SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

This Sunday's First Reading is a Lesson from chapter eight of the Prophet Amos. In ancient Israel, there were professional prophets, but Amos was not one of them.

Amos was, we might say, a layman, called by God to preach a quite particular message to Israel. The message was simple: You are in trouble. Why? Earlier in the Book of Amos, the Prophet says that Israel is in trouble for three things.

Woe to those who turn justice to wormwood!

Woe to those who desire the day of the Lord!

Woe to those who are ease in Zion and . . . feel secure in the mountains of Samaria.

In other words:

Woe to those who oppress the poor!

Woe to those whose worship is hypocritical!

Woe to the complacent rich!

Towards the end of the Book of Amos we find today's passage, which denounces the failure of the Israelites to love their neighbors and do justice to the poor. Immediately after this passage, the Prophet denounces also the failure of the Israelites to love the Lord, and to avoid all pagan worship. For the Prophet Amos, love of God and love of Neighbor go together, as do justice to the poor and worship of God. Lacking love of God and love of Neighbor, not doing justice to the poor and not properly worshiping God, Israel is in trouble. There will be a judgment. That judgment will be harsh, but it will not be the Lord's final word for Israel. The book of Amos ends on a note of hope, the Lord promising through Amos that His ultimate intention is to restore all the peace and well being that was lost in Eden.

The lesson for us is clear enough. We are to love God and Neighbor. We are to love God by worshiping Him, and avoiding all pagan worship. We are to love our neighbors particularly by acting justly towards them, above all towards the poor and disadvantaged. For failure to worship God and to do justice, there will be a judgment, possibly even a harsh judgment. God does not want that judgment to be the last word for us, however. If we cooperate at all with Him, eternal peace and well being, far beyond what Eden offered, will be ours in Christ Jesus, the Divine Son who assumed human nature to enable human beings to enter into Divine Life.

The Second Reading, from St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, reminds us that God's will for us is only accomplished with and through Jesus Christ. God wants us human beings to share in Divine Life. This can happen only through One Who is the Mediator between God and Man, Jesus Christ.

Mediator is an important word. In many situations, it is vital to have a mediator. When people are truly enemies, the only way they can be reconciled, and gradually brought into friendship, is through a mediator, a "middleman", you might say, who knows and loves them both. The Eternal Father knows the human race He created, but His Son knows the human race in the absolute sense of being truly human. One with the Father without beginning or end in the

Eternal Life of the Blessed Trinity, the Three-Personed God, the Son chose to assume Human Nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The distance between the Eternal God and mere Humanity was an infinite distance, but, since the Incarnation of God and Man in Jesus Christ, it is no distance at all. God and Man are one in Jesus Christ. Consequently, He is able to bring all people who are willing to belong to Him, by Faith and Good Works, into Divine Life. Who can imagine what "Heaven" is like? "Heaven" is the word we use for sharing in Divine Life, but there is no way the human mind can grasp just what that means, or just what that will be like. Still, in Jesus Christ that is what is promised to all who love God.

Jesus Christ is the One true Mediator between God and Man, but in a sense all persons who share in Divine Life, all the Angels and Saints, and even those on earth on their way to becoming Saints, participate in His mediation. They are absolutely subordinate to Him, but He gives them a role to play in the salvation of the human race. Each Christian on the way to Sainthood (and all Christians who truly cooperate with the Lord Jesus are on the way to sainthood) has a uniquely personal role to play in the story of human salvation, but one thing all have in common is prayer. There would be no point to prayer if Jesus Christ insisted on doing all the work of Salvation Himself, which He certainly could do. That is not how He has chosen to work. He gives us Good Works to do, under His guidance and inspiration. Under His guidance and inspiration, we are also to pray, as He promises that He will give power to our prayers. In today's reading St. Paul, in Jesus' name, commands us to pray for all who exercise authority in government. In and under Jesus Christ, Christians are to be mediators between God and those who on earth have governing authority over them.

I wonder if you and I properly realize our dignity as Christians. In and under Jesus Christ, we are mediators between God and the rest of the human race. Absolutely subordinate to Jesus Christ, we help link the human race to God. We do this by the witness of Good Works, but also by the power of our prayers. During seminary years in the early 90s I briefly worked at an AIDS hospice run by St. Theresa of Calcutta's Missionaries of Charity. Following Mother Theresa's directions, they made it clear that all volunteers for the afternoon were to join them in the 3:00 pm Holy Hour. That was not negotiable. Aided by God's Grace, we were by our good work, however limited, to show something of the Love of God, and so be mediators between God and "the poorest of the poor". We were also to be mediators for our fellow creatures through prayer, in, with, and through Jesus Christ, the One Mediator. Only He truly knows the good we did in our work, however clumsy at times. Even more, only He knows the good we did in our prayers, however drowsy at times.

St. Paul tells us to pray particularly for those who exercise worldly authority. Do we pray for Mayors, Governors, and Presidents? Do we pray for Pastors, Bishops, and Bishops of Rome (Popes)? St. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy while poor, wretched Nero was Roman Emperor. This command to pray for those in worldly authority is not a command to pray for those authority figures we like. We are to pray for all of them. In my lifetime there have been eleven American presidents, and I can remember nine of them being president (Johnson was president in the days when I was mewling and puking in my mother's arms, and Nixon in the days when I was toddling about and playing in mud puddles). I have not had the same feelings about all nine.

Nor have I had the same feelings about all governors of Wyoming or local mayors. Still, the Lord's command is to pray for them. The Lord's command is that we, in charity, make ourselves, in Christ, mediators between God and Presidents, Governors, and Mayors, as well as Pastors, Bishops, and Popes. The greater their power, the more exposed they are to multiple temptations, and the more damage they do when they make mistakes. The greater their power, the more they need our mediation before God, with and through our one Mediator, Jesus Christ.

In today's Gospel reading, our True Mediator between God and Man gives all of humanity a solemn warning from God. We cannot serve both God and "Mammon" "Mammon" was an Aramaic word, somewhat difficult to translate, the language experts say. More than just money, "Mammon" was wealth in all its forms, including intangible forms. I would say that "Mammon" means money, popularity, and power (three distinct, but closely related things: they are three different things, but having one of them makes it easier to get the other two). Our Mediator warns us that we cannot serve God, which is to love God, while we are infatuated with Mammon. As long as we are fascinated with money, popularity, and power, we cannot love God or Neighbor, and fall under the curse prophesied by Amos for those who oppress the poor and do not worship God.

The quest for popularity is particularly acute in a "celebrity" obsessed civilization, and it carries its own unique temptations. Those are subtle temptations, however, and generally don't do as much harm in the world as the temptations to money and power. All my life, it seems to me, the twin giants - twins that utterly hate each other - of "Capitalism" and "Socialism" have been screaming at each other. For a while in the 90s people supposed that the Socialist Giant had suffered a fatal heart attack, but not so. The Capitalist Giant seems to be having health problems right now, and perhaps in the 2030s people will imagine that he has had his fatal heart attack, but that will not be so. The mistake of each Giant is deeply rooted in fallen human nature, and only the Lord's Second Coming will finish them off. Both Giants are servants of Mammon.

The Capitalist Giant claims that if people are free to pursue financial profit by all available means, in the long run that will work out wonderfully for everyone. A younger friend of mine lives and works in "rust belt" Ohio, and a priest friend of mine lives and works in Detroit. When businesses seeking maximum profits moved their industries out of America to lands of cheaper labor, they killed places like Detroit and much of Ohio. The quest for maximum profits did not work out wonderfully for everyone.

On the other side, bellowing loudly, the Socialist Giant claims that if the governing authorities have the power to control and organize everything properly for the "common good" (a basically good phrase so scandalously misused that I have given up on it), everything will work out wonderfully for everyone. A friend of mine went to work in impoverished, sickly, horribly polluted Poland immediately after the fall of the Socialist regime in the very early 90s. Government control had not worked out so wonderfully. A man I baptized had tears in his eyes as he described the ugliness of life in China in 2010s, away from where the foreigners visit. Government control is not working out so wonderfully.

One Giant serves Mammon by emphasizing maximum financial profit. One Giant serves Mammon by emphasizing maximum government control.

Both, serving Mammon, cannot love God and Neighbor. Both, in their different ways, ignore God and oppress the poor. Both fall under the divine judgment prophesied by Amos.

Back in the 1950s a mostly successful William Holden vehicle, a movie entitled "Executive Suite", explored the possibility of a business being run not to maximize profits for shareholders, but to provide good work to employees and good products to consumers. There would still need to be profits, obviously, but, to play with a cliché, the horse would actually be in front the cart. First seek to take care of your workers and offer a good product to consumers, and then work on your profit margins. Don't try to do it the other way around. That, perhaps, would be doing good business without serving Mammon. Perhaps love of your country could be added to that. An elderly Chinese immigrant to America once lamented to me about how eager American corporations were to move their plants out of America, if that would help their fiscal bottom line. Might they love their country enough to give work here? In addition to patriotism, perhaps they could even give their employees a chance to worship God on the Lord's Day.

The government could help them take care of workers and consumers, not trying to take control, but having reasonable regulations about workers' rights and consumer protection, offering incentives to stay in America and penalties for leaving, and affirming that Freedom of Religion includes affording working people a reasonable chance to participate in Divine Worship

I imagine that such a system might still be called "Capitalism", since economic enterprise would still essentially be in private hands. It would, however, be different from the Giant who shouts that seeking maximum profit all by itself will magically produce good results for everyone.

In the end, good results for everyone come from people having a strong sense of justice under God. In the end, good results for everyone come from people loving God and Neighbor. That those in authority may come to love God and Neighbor should be the mediation that we, united to Jesus Christ, the One Mediator between God and Man, make for them during the rest of this Holy Mass.