* Tellers of unpopular truths have a rough time in this world.
* Tellers of popular untruths often seem to glide through life.

Today’s readings show us that this was the case in the eight century BCE and the first century CE as well as today.

Prophets are, above all else, truth-tellers, without regard for the popularity or any regard for others’ feelings about that truth. They are neither crystal-ball gazers nor predictors of future events. They do foretell the likely future consequences of present misbehavior. Even in that regard, this ability is not their own, but something given them—gift or affliction—by God.

Most of the biblical prophets didn’t want the job. Amos, for example, floats a kind of disclaimer to the office by saying, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son.” Meaning, I suppose, that he was not appointed to the position by some ruler, nor did he inherit the title from his family line. Reluctantly (we might imagine), he goes on to admit, “The Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”

What a wonderful phrase, indicating that he was taken out of the flock, cut from the herd, in order to proclaim some difficult truths to the flock and, especially, those who were in charge of it.

The people in the northern kingdom had enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity built upon a foundation of corruption, both religious and political, particularly oppression and exploitation of the poor. He particularly condemned hollow and hypocritical religious ritual masquerading as righteousness while this corruption and exploitation continued.

He consistently proclaimed a message of justice for all, based on the qualities we read about in Psalm 85—righteousness, peace, and truth.

His reward was banishment from the kingdom.

John the Baptist, as we know, suffered an even harsher consequence for relentlessly proclaiming his message of liberation from sin and salvation for everyone who follows the dictates of God’s loving will.

When he applied that standard to Herod and his unlawful marriage to Herodias, he paid with his life in one of the most graphic scenes in the New Testament.

The prophet’s life is not an easy one. Prophets stand out—from the flock or the herd, we might say—in part, because they are few in number compared to the rest of humanity. That means that, he says with some relief, none of us might be called to be a prophet like Amos or John. We all are called, of course, to be truth-tellers in our own lives, in our own circumstances, even if we are not all prophets.

We also need to remember that prophecy is not the only gift or virtue shared out among the faithful, the Body of Christ. There are many ways to serve God by serving our fellow human beings, and we see examples of that all around us, both within our little parish family and beyond it—preparing meals for those who need them, praying for each other, visiting, making phone calls, teaching, keeping each other informed about needs, keeping our church and grounds attractive, sharing with others in countless ways the good news of God’s love for every single human being. The list is endless.

With this in mind, let’s listen again to the words of today’s Collect which was written in its original form over fifteen hundred years ago and which points to the vocation or calling of all who believe in a loving God:

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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