

## The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost Amos 7:7-15

*For everything there is a season, it is said in the book of Ecclesiastes, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. And these are words of wisdom; well, they would have to be, being that they are words of Holy Scripture, and as such, words from God.*

It is a lesson well worth learning, also for those to whom it has been entrusted to speak the Word of God, that there is a *time to keep silence* as well as a *time to speak*. Yes, although it might come as a surprise to some of you, I am aware that there is a *time to keep silence* as well as a *time to speak*.

And this holds true, even when it comes to the Word of God. *Do not give what is holy to the dogs, says our Lord Jesus, nor cast your pearls before swine.* There are situations in which it is right not to speak of the things of God. At times it will be obviously futile, because it is clear that nobody is willing to hear. Even worse, an atmosphere can be so frivolous or ugly that it would not only be *futile* to introduce the Word of God into it, but *blasphemous*, it would be to *degrade* the things of God, to let that which is holy be not only *exposed* to ridicule, but reduced itself to crude entertainment. Where I come from it is said that the only thing more embarrassing than being the only drunk in the party is being the only one sober; well, if you have ever been there, you will understand. It makes more sense to speak to a wall than it does to speak sense to a drunk; it is just as fruitful, and you will feel less foolish afterwards for having done it.

Another perspective on this is that when the holy Apostle Peter admonishes Christians to *always be ready to give a defence to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you*, he adds the admonition to *do so with gentleness and respect, and with a good conscience, so that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.* There are ways to testify to the things of God that cannot rightfully be referred to as *good conduct*, and about which one should not have a *good conscience*. There is the kind of evangelism so often found on bumper stickers and t-shirts, the message of which, more than anything else, is that *I am better than you because I am a Christian.* And there are Christians who mostly express the same, not only by what they say, nor even only by the way they say things.

Some come off conveying their own goodness rather than the goodness of by their relentlessness, their lack of gentleness and respect, and their lack of the sense that there is a time to keep silence as well as a time to speak.

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.* These are words of wisdom, as well as words from God. And wisdom should be employed even when it comes to speaking of the things of God.

From what we hear today, though, we also learn that the time and place to speak the Word of God, or not to speak, is not merely a matter of convenience; nor is it a matter of whether or not there are some who would rather not have it spoken, either because they themselves would rather not hear it, or because they suspect that others would rather not.

We hear it today that Amaziah the priest of Bethel said to the Prophet called by God: *Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. Eat bread there, and prophesy there. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the royal residence.*

Often even well-meaning Christians will not only call for cautiousness in speaking the Word of God, but actually call for the Truth of God not to be spoken at all, at least not to some. Some are afraid that outsiders will be offended by the Word of God; they hope that if the Word of God is not spoken to them, they might want to be members of the congregation, and that would be good, because things were so much better in the good old days when we were so many in Church, and, more importantly, the congregation needs more members to get more money! Some are genuinely concerned about the salvation of those who are outside, and they are afraid that if they are offended by the Word of God, they will not want to be Christian, and then they will not be saved all because the Word of God was spoken to them! Some are adamant about those they care about, friends or family, who will not be Christian and will not lead a Christian life, that the Church should not in any way make it appear that they are wrong in having made that choice, nor in any other way do anything that might upset them, rather, the Church should accommodate them, and they should have their way in all things in Church.

And many Christians have been conditioned to feeling shameful about holding the Word and will of God before those who reject it and will not know of it. For decades we have been told that to do so is not to be *Christian*, and it is to be *judgemental*.

And many Christians have come to if not actually *believe* it, then at least to *feel* that way, and feel bad about that which is good, the Word and will of God.

*Never again prophesy at Bethel*, the priest of Bethel said to the Prophet, *for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the royal residence*. It would not be *polite* to speak the Word of God there, for it would be to disrespect the king. The Prophet was still free to speak the Word of God, of course, but not there. O, and by the way, to speak the Word of God is what it means to *prophesy*.

Today, also, many who would prohibit the Church of Christ from speaking His Word, and His Christians from acting in accordance with it, will insist that they have no intention of outlawing the faith. Christians would still be free to believe what they want if they have their way, they say, it is just that they will not be allowed to speak or live out their faith in *public life*. This is the idea behind speaking of *freedom of worship* rather than *freedom of religion*.

And like so many who wish to silence the Word of God, the priest of Bethel was also adamant that he had no animosity against the Prophet, or even against his preaching. *Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. Eat bread there, and prophesy there*. O yes, he wished the Prophet well; after all, they were united in a common faith. Or so he said. The truth is, though, that they were not. The priest of Bethel was not a servant of the true God, not at all; the god he served at Bethel was one of the golden calves Jeroboam had set up, and of which he had said: *Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!* In other words, it was a false god, blasphemously identified with the true God of Israel.

Now, when people insist, even Christians, that the Word of God should not be spoken, there are always some assumptions implied; although often those insisting are not aware of those assumptions themselves, or they would not be Christian.

One assumption is that God cannot and does not Himself, by His Word, work faith in those who hear it; therefore the Church needs to bait and manipulate unbelievers into accepting the faith by withholding elements of the faith from them. Another assumption is that it is not really a problem when one refuses to submit to the Word and will of God. And the basic assumption, from which both these other assumptions arise, is that God is not real, not the God of Holy Scripture; that we do not actually know the only true God from His Word in Holy Scripture, who He is and what is His will, rather, God is who or what we choose to think that He is, or she, or it.

The truth is, though, that the true God has spoken, and still speaks; that this is the Christian faith; that it is from this truth the Christian faith flows forth; and that it is only because this is true that anybody ever embraces the Christian faith, whether they were raised to do that or not.

As we hear it in the Prophet's response to the priest of Bethel: *I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the Lord took me as I followed the flock, And the Lord said to me: 'Go, prophesy to My people Israel.*

The Prophet had not chosen himself to speak what he spoke. God Himself had spoken what he spoke, and laid it upon him to speak it, His judgement against the worship of false gods, and His call to return to the true faith and worship of God. As such, the Prophet really could do nothing other than do as he was told, and do so where God had sent him to do so, even if Bethel was the royal residence and the king's sanctuary, the very centre of idolatry; for idolatry is evil, as is all ungodliness, and those engaged in ungodliness must be called to repentance, for the sake of their salvation, and because ungodliness is evil. For God is real; and at the end of time the Son of God shall come in glory to judge all evil to death and destruction; but His will is to save. Therefore is it that the holy Apostle Paul writes to his apprentice Timothy: *I charge you, therefore, before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! And: be ready in season and out of season, that is, not only when it is convenient, but also when it is not. Because, as the Apostle also writes it to his apprentice, God our Saviour, desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.*

The Son of God gave Himself up to sufferings and death for the salvation of sinners. He who shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead took it upon Himself to bear His own judgement against evil and ungodliness. In His Word He promises sinners full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and shortcoming, freely and for nothing, all on account of what He has done for us. Such is His love. And He will not have His Word of salvation withheld from anyone; although He would have it applied with wisdom.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.