

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 31, 2016

Salvation history shows us that it's often difficult to accept a prophet. Especially someone who comes along with a new way of thinking or a radical idea that undermines our established way of thinking.

For hundreds of years before Jesus, authentic prophets were usually ignored or maligned and worse by the religious establishment because they had a new perspective on God's love.

Of course that doesn't mean that we should every new and passing trend in religious thought or moral behavior otherwise we would soon be lost. So the main difficulty is in discerning the true prophet from the false one. So maybe we can understand a little better how religious authority, both now and then, tend to instinctively mistrust prophets.

Recalling last week's Gospel reading, it seemed that the people of Nazareth accepted Jesus at first but then he seems to have gone too far. He crossed some sort of invisible boundary.

That invisible boundary was there because their understanding of the role of Israel as the chosen people is that all but the people of Israel were to be excluded. But Jesus didn't see it that way. Sure, the Jews are a chosen people and they certainly were chosen by God to bring the Messiah into the world but they weren't chosen to keep the Messiah all to themselves.

So when Jesus pointed out what they had conveniently forgotten, that the great prophets Elijah and Elisha also had a mission to the Gentiles, the crowd turned nasty.

They could take his inspiring words but they couldn't take his quoting their own history back at them—especially when it proved them wrong.

This incident in the synagogue of Nazareth is something of a pattern for many other incidents in the Gospels. Jesus spoke inspirational words or performed healings or other miracles

and everyone was astonished. But then he told them a few hard truths, which upset more than a few cherished and long held ideas – and that's why they turned against him.

The religious people of Jesus day rejected the Gospel again and again because Christ treated everyone the same. He had no privileged group; he had no favorites.

The People of Israel had regarded themselves as a special group for so many centuries that they couldn't comprehend that God would love anyone else.

They forgot all the times that they too had gone other ways; they failed to remember how they so frequently rejected authentic prophets sent by God.

Sure, they were the chosen people, but they had lost sight of the reason *why* God chose them. He chose them in order to bring Christ the Savior and Messiah, into the world. He set them apart so that he could teach them about what kind of a God he is.

Their favored status was not for their own glory. Their favored status was so that they could be of service to the rest of humanity.

We Catholics can sometimes be a little bit like that. We've preserved the faith of the Apostles intact. We have kept our doctrines regarding faith and morals uncontaminated by the secular world over many centuries.

Sometimes we have, of course, gone astray, sometimes tragically and even criminally, but the Holy Spirit has dragged us back to the right path and kept us true to the name of Christ.

One of the four marks of the Church is that it is holy. The blood of the martyrs and the lives many saints, both small and great that constantly appear in her midst, blesses it.

But the blessings we have received isn't because we as individuals have been found to

be especially worthy. It's not for our own personal glory or reward. The work we have done and the faith we have shown brings us no special merit. No, we're merely the instruments Christ uses to convey his Gospel to the world.

Our witness to the faith, our perseverance, our long hours of prayer, our resistance of temptation, or grappling with hard moral choices—are merely what anyone else would do who was privileged to receive the gift of faith as we have done.

We too are a chosen people. And we praise and thank God for this great gift. But this gift is not given solely for ourselves. It's given to us so that we can convey it to others and be messengers of love and hope for the world.

And we must also keep in mind that it's on the effectiveness with which we carry out the task of conveying to others Christ's message to the world that we will one day be judged.

So let our prayer be today one of thanks to God for choosing us to be prophets. Let's ask him for the help and strength we need to carry out this task to the best of our ability. And our best may not seem unexceptional, but it ought to be convincing, it ought to be authentic, and it ought to be faithful to the Good News of Jesus and his message of mercy.