

If you were the parents of boy Jesus, you would have been proud. He was born with a great signs: Angels showed up to announce his birth. The Magi from the east visited to worship him. When he was barely 12 years old, he was as smart as the Ph.D. equivalent of the time—the teachers of the law—so that he could carry on dialogues with them. The accounts about his formative years, although as plenty as the skin of teeth, were described as follows:

He increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor (Lk. 2:52).

And when he grew up, he returned to his hometown, and taught his own people in the synagogue. Luke gave Jesus' homecoming a rave review:

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth (Lk. 4:22a).

I do not know about you, but I would argue that Jesus was an ideal child for any parents to have. And any parents would have dreamed what he would

become, when he grew up. With all that divine signs, with all that brilliance of intellect, with all those divine and human favors, who would not dream about his bright future? A renowned scholar-rabbi? Will he be the chairperson of Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body? Or, will he be the leader of the nation who would expel the Gentiles, unify the Hebrew people, and restore the glory of the Davidic kingdom?

That rosy dream was shattered the moment Jesus opened his mouth for the second time. When he did, the synagogue's wonderful ambience of gracious words and divine and human favor suddenly degenerated into foam-biting, spittle-spraying rage. What happened?

Something must have happened at the homecoming event. Jesus taught much later his listeners about being popular among people:

"Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets (Lk. 6:26).

The writer said in the chapter 2 Jesus was the focus of all divine and human favor, but by the chapter 6, Jesus believed that such favors from men weren't all that cracked up to be, and denounced any human praises as worthless lip services rendered to the fake prophets. What Jesus referred to was the situation, when the false prophet prophesied the false prophecy that was sweet to the ears. False prophets receive praises from people, precisely because they prophesy what the people want to hear, not necessarily the word that God wants them to hear.

What is it that people want to hear from the prophets? What the people want to hear from the prophets is that: *God loves them, God blesses them, God wants them to be rich and prosperous, and that no one can harm them.* Whether it was in the prophets' time, whether it was in Jesus' time, or whether it was in our time, the false prophets know what the people wanted to hear is always the same; so they told them. They frequented the royal

courts. They knew what the king wanted to hear. They were the politicians of the day.

Prophet Amos prophesied against his people who told him not to prophesy:

"Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac...' (Am. 7:16)'

Prophet Micah also referred to such pressure from his people in his complaint against them:

⁶ "Do not preach" --thus they preach-- "one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us (Mic. 2:6)."

Whether or not it was the genuine prophet prophesying the genuine prophecy, it did not matter. If it did not please their ears, they did not want to hear it, period. Furthermore, since God loves them and blesses them, God could not possibly have authorized the prophets to utter such nonsense! They just wanted such prophets to shut up!

No one likes to hear criticism, especially from those who

profess to speak for God. If the ancient people wanted to muzzle the prophets of doom, what about the modern day people? How would they react against those who allege to speak for God? How many preachers will be praised, if he or she preached something like:

"No, no, no, God damn America! God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."

This still sounds offensive today. There have been preachers like that, and we know they have retired or disappeared into obscurity, and they do not get taken seriously. Even people around them don't want to be caught in the same picture with them any more.

Jesus merely told his audience in the synagogue what happened in prophet Elijah's time as recorded in the scriptures: that Elijah was sent to none of the house of Israel except to a widow at Zarepath in Sidon; and that in the time of prophet Elijah, there were

many lepers in Israel, but none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. That was all. And that drove the whole synagogue into a bloodthirsty chaos.

We the modern readers might question: What was so offensive about that? It was offensive to them, because Jesus basically told them that:

1) God abandoned God's own chosen people, Israelites, in times of famine; instead, God chose the Gentile woman who lived in Sidon. 2) God rejected God's own chosen people, but healed the Gentile, a Syrian, from leprosy.

Having heard that God bypassed God's own people, and that God chose instead some Gentiles whom they despised, everyone flew into rage. If this is doubtful, just recall what happened, when the pastor's sermon was dug up during the presidential campaign in 2008. America was one place that was filled with outrage. Maybe, what the audience felt on that Sabbath day was much more outrageous.

That was all Jesus said in that synagogue on that homecoming Sabbath day. Jesus only said what was already in the scriptures, but the whole synagogue erupted, and flew into a rage. And the ideal son trashed his bright future before one could say, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

All who, just a moment ago, spoke well of Jesus turned into a lynch mob, when they heard Jesus point to the biblical events that negated their popular beliefs that defined who they were. Jesus confirmed how fragile and tenuous their good will was when he merely reminded them what the scriptures said.

Let us not repeat the mistakes of old. It is not just the Jews: it happens to the best of us. Our own history speaks volumes of the times, when people have been lynched and oppressed, just for being different, and for having the different ideas and beliefs: the same is true, even today. Those who challenged those ideologies and beliefs, often paid with their own lives. Some of

them were truly the prophets of our times.

We are not prophets. God probably did not call any one of us to lead the life of a prophet. There comes time, however, when one needs to speak the truth. And that truth may be so costly, that it may just about wipe out anyone's bright future—one's career, one's earning potential, one's freedom, even one's life might be in jeopardy.

The enraged people in the synagogue dragged Jesus out to the edge of the cliff, because they wanted to toss him down. But Luke narrates that Jesus coolly passed through the midst of them, and went on his way. Those who are committed to the truth do not flinch in the face of the threat, because they know that they stand upright before God. They also know that the cost of truth is as dear as one's life.

May God grant us the courage to speak the truth, and to live the truth. Amen.