

Almost always, any time numbers are mentioned in the Bible, they carry some additional significance. We are familiar with the importance of numbers like seven, which connotes perfection; forty meaning a full length of time; or the mention of three days which always anticipate God revealing His work. One of the most repeated numbers in Scripture which occurs all throughout the Old Testament and with corresponding significance in the New Testament is the number twelve.

Two places where the number twelve carries the most weight is in the twelve Tribes of Israel which were a prefiguration of Jesus' chosen twelve Apostles. In today's gospel we heard that Jesus sent His twelve Apostles on their first mission in teams of two. They were charged with carrying out specific tasks which He assigned to them: to proclaim the need for repentance; to cast out demons; and to anoint and heal the sick. As a matter of fact, these same ministries are carried out to this day by all priests who share in Christ's priesthood. Although today, it is rare that we would go out doing so two by two.

As I previously mentioned, the typical correspondence between the twelve Apostles of the New Testament and the Old Testament are the twelve sons of Israel who each led their own tribe. I wonder, though, if another numerical connection could be drawn between the Apostles and a different group in the Old Testament? I am referring to the Minor Prophets.

There is an entire genre of literature in the Bible which is known as 'prophecy' or 'prophetic literature'. We are very familiar with hearing our first readings at Mass to often come from *The Book of the Prophet "so-and-so"*. Among all of the prophets, a relatively arbitrary distinction is made dividing the group into two between the Major and the Minor prophets. These designations have nothing to do with the importance or contribution of their works compared to each other; but rather, it is an indication of longer versus shorter books. And among those prophets whose writings are determined to be shorter, there just so happen to be twelve of them. This development of Scriptural Tradition is no coincidence. It seems that there could be drawn some important connections between the vocation of the minor prophets and the vocation of the twelve apostles.

The first and most obvious is that all 24 are called by God and commissioned with a divine appointment. Another is that, by and large, they were chosen from among very simple, unskilled and uneducated men. Finally, none of them seemed to feel very well equipped or particularly prepared to undertake the task which was being set before them. We hear a bit of the story of one such of these men in today's first reading from the book of the Prophet Amos.

In the excerpt from which we heard, Amos declares what he truly thinks about himself and his mission, "I am no Prophet, nor a Prophet's son; but I am a

herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" In this declaration, we encounter a reluctant prophet who would have preferred to stay doing what he knew and was good at and was intimidated by what was being asked of him instead. Furthermore, we know from additional details in this book that he lived in the South and was being charged with going to challenge the prosperous and powerful people of the North. It was certain that he would not be very well received. From the outset to the bitter end, Amos' mission was tough.

Having considered this one example of the minor prophets, we observe a striking difference between the two groups of twelve: Christ's Apostles were commissioned and sent in pairs; but the minor prophets undertake their respective missions solo. Throughout the Old Testament, God never appointed a team of prophets who went together to deliver their difficult messages. When it came to standing up to the culture of their day, they simply had to go it alone.

The apostle's work, on the other hand, seems far more exciting to engage in, what with exorcisms, facilitating reconciliation, healing the sick and bringing Christ in a tangible way to the people. This work, however, is taken care of largely by priests as it is specifically what they are ordained to do. An issue might arise, therefore, if one of our Lord's faithful followers were tempted to choose between one mission or the other: persecuted prophet or acclaimed apostle?

The fact of the matter is that our Lord determined the work of continuing His sacramental ministry would be left to His priests, presumably because it was the smaller work to be accomplished, which makes sense given the fact that it is the smaller group of Christians whom He calls to undertake it. The mission of the minor prophets, however, is more necessary than ever- and this is the work to be undertaken by each of the baptized lay faithful; that means you!

The need is very great for prophets to go out into every segment of society and proclaim what is true, good and beautiful. In so many instances, this will contradict popular opinion which is precisely why it needs to be said. As a priest, my work keeps me fairly restricted to reaching yourselves and not much further than the walls of our religious institutions, but *YOU* my dear sisters and brothers, have the whole rest of the world within your reach. Our Lord is counting on you to be the modern minor prophets.

I grant that you may not always have the comfort of a partner or team in this work but it must be done anyway! There is a longer and noble tradition of God's messengers- the prophets- than even Christ's Apostles. That mission cannot be understated, and it is yours to be taken up with fervor. Like Amos, you may feel ill equipped or intimidated. It's a good thing, then, that you have been filled with the Spirit of Christ to bring His gospel to every corner of the earth.