

Some people like praying outdoors; some do not. There is a trend among many to find God more in nature than church. Newlyweds prefer their marriage to be on a beach. Some people just do not want to be part of an institution. I saw a beautiful picture last week of a group of people on top of Mount Sinai in the desert. They have climbed the mountain overnight. They are cold and quiet as they await the rising sun over the mountainous vista. Many are kneeling in adoration and prayer. You have to feel this and be awakened.

Meanwhile Sinai is complemented by Zion, the holy city in Jerusalem, the temple, the center of a tradition of a people who have entered into a covenant with God. The Torah, the Ark of the Covenant, priestly sacrifice, practices of prayer and fasting, hold these people together. Sinai and Zion paradoxically bring together the ways people express their relationship with their God. Sinai alone, satisfying in many ways if you are young enough to climb, can also be an excessively individual way to relate to God. Zion connects people with others, fellow Jews, resident aliens, strangers. When the monarchy is introduced, imperial power has to be balanced by the prophets who bring people back to their fundamental relationships to a God who has chosen them. Power must always be held in check. In the Middle Ages, monarchs often had court jesters to openly ridicule the King and bring him to see his arrogance and misuse of power. But, in general, the Christian churches have followed their Jewish ancestors in balancing Sinai and Zion.

Following Christ and identifying him through Baptism, we need Sinai in our lives – quiet, ascetic times when we leave all to enter into prayer and presence with God. As we became a largely urban people and as the piety of the church after the Protestant Reformation became more institutionalized, personal prayer became more the use of formularized forms as the Rosary, Novenas, apparitions and miracles. Personal experience, the climbing of Sinai, was left to the priest. The priest, male and celibate, had to do everything for the laity.

But Zion also lost its prominence. Liturgy, scripture, basic knowledge of the Christian story and tradition was also neglected. We have been struggling to accept the Second Vatican Council and rediscover our true Christian inheritance. But passivity had been a strong characteristic of the people of God. One survey says that seventy percent of Catholics who go to church see Sunday Mass as the only real feature of being a Catholic Christian. In the Creed we pray, “I believe in

the Holy Spirit, the giver of life... who has spoken through the prophets.” Both Holy Spirit and the prophets have not always been part of our Christian life. The genius of Pope Francis and the Synod to be resumed in Rome in October, is that this is an attempt to bring all the people into an active role of listening, praying, speaking up and acting.

Today’s Sunday scriptures, the Word of God, moves us to recover our full legacy of Sinai and Zion. The prophet Amos was a herdsman in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century before Christ. He went north to the kingdom of Israel and preached at the King’s shrine in Bethel. The local priest tried to get him to leave. What did Amos preach? He said that it is not enough to have pretty temple worship if you are not giving a just wage to your workers and tending to the needs of the poor. Religion is with and for others.

Saint Paul, writing to the Ephesians, begins this letter, unlike most of his letters, with a blessing. Paul blesses God and the recipients of God’s blessing by describing God’s universal plan for salvation. By our baptism we have been blessed by God to spread the good news to all people and not just our own. This is not just an individual blessing but given to us as the people of God. Our tradition helps us to spread this to others.

And, finally, Mark’s gospel today tells us that this blessing sends us forth as ministers of Jesus. Two by two he sends us out to make known the kingdom of God. We can’t keep it to ourselves.

So we are people of Sinai, pursuing the face of God in wilderness and nature and bowing down in adoration. And we are people of Zion, members of a people who live a tradition based on the teachings of Christ. We are called not to sit back and be passive spectators but active members who come to know and love Christ well and share his teachings and love with others. Where do you find Sinai your life? And what is your part in Zion?

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