

Prophets, Rulers, Priests and Counsellors

Gen 24:34-38,42-49,58-67; Psalm 45:10-17; Rom 7:14-25; Matt 11:15-30

There are many ways of preparing a sermon. In our parish we almost always follow the lessons set down for the day in the lectionary. Occasionally however we stray onto other ground. One particular ground is when the preacher is wrestling with some issue for a reason. Today I want to follow that path.

I will say a little about why I am wrestling with this issue but that really is not important here – it is the general principles and questions that confront all of us as we walk the Christian life that I will focus on as we progress.

As some of you know I am on the Environmental Working Group of General Synod of the Australian Church and we have been directed by the last General Synod to: *advocate for a sustainable economy with the national government, giving high priority to environmental and social, as well as to economic imperatives, for the long term wellbeing of all life on earth*". As part of this we are to *“develop a series of discussion papers with theological and policy reflection on key topics”*.

To this end we have just prepared statements on Water Management in the Murray-Darling Basin and on the need to reduce Carbon Emissions. As you will understand these are highly contentious issues with faithful Christians holding a wide range of irreconcilable positions. The question we have been wrestling with is: what role should the church play – for that matter what role should individual Christians play on such issues?

A classic role we all play in our daily dealings as well as in bigger issues may be summed up by the feeling that the ‘the truth is out there’ and that somehow we can derive from Scripture a single unifying principle that will align these positions and lead us (with the appropriate sense of guilt, confession and breast beating) into a course of action that will resolve all the problems. Such a conclusion will also give us the basis with which to announce that those of a different view are in need of repentance unless they see things our way.

We did not see this as a proper Christian way.

As the Working Group prayed and wrestled with the issue, our reading led us to realise that there are four positions we might hold, those of prophet, ruler, priest or counsellor. Let me start with rulers and prophets.

Christians are used to the concept of prophets and have developed the idea that they are the ‘goodies’ while the rulers are the ‘baddies’. Prophets are usually seen as ‘unreasonable people’, dissatisfied with the status quo, dreaming of what could or should be and striving to bring this about. Because of their ‘unreasonableness’, they can bring about progress. They continually ask ‘Why not?’ and cajole us to see things differently, often warning us about what things will be like if we do not change.

The tools of their trade are: a simple message, hyperbole, dramatisation, and a lot of self righteous indignation. ‘Thus saith the Lord!’ spoken with conviction and emphasis (and accompanied by attention-grabbing stunts) nearly always gets a good hearing and uncritical press coverage. It was that way in Biblical times too, think of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The Bible however warns us that false prophets also exist. Thus Christians should be sceptical of any idealised portrayal of prophets keeping to their principles. For any of a number of reasons the prophetic voice can be corrupted and we need to heed the Scriptural warning about testing for false prophecies.

That said, however, it is the rulers and not the prophets who ‘make things happen’. Prophets can say what they like (indeed, it is their responsibility to do so) but it is with the ‘rulers’ that the responsibility for action lies. A feature of the options presented to rulers for decision is that they are rarely black or white, right or wrong. Usually they are grey or darker grey, ordinary or not so ordinary. This is often despite the efforts of the prophets to paint them in simpler hues. In fact, it is the wide range of prophetic voices that the decision makers have to deal with that makes the job so complex. In this way rulers and their decision making are responsive to their communities.

The quality of a ruler’s decisions is assessed not only by the desirability of the outcome but by:

- 1 .whether the decision can be made in the first place;
2. whether the decision can be implemented, and;
3. how long that decision lasts.

It is no good intending to make decisions (no matter how worthy the cause) if they can’t get through the decision-making process, be implemented or if they are dismantled by those who subsequently come into power. Rulers are pragmatists.

Now I have spoken of these matters as on a large stage. The exact same challenges however confront each of us in our daily lives. Think for a moment of your own life.

Where have you spoken out as prophet? In a child or parent's behaviour? In some decision at work? In some organisation to which you belong?

How about when you have acted as ruler. In family financial decisions? Who do we invite to the wedding? Which company gets the contract. Which choice should our parish make on some issue?

To what extent did your Christianity inform your decision? Were we Christian in our actions? Did we dream of what could or should be and strive to bring this about? Did we use power rightly?

The third option open to Christians is as priests. We are all members of the royal priesthood of all believers, as Peter says. We are called to serve the rest of the world. The two priestly functions that stand out for me in this context are intercession and pastoral care. With intercession we are called on to pray for the world, its leaders and those in need. In terms of confronting challenges that are facing the world, in terms of making decisions that need to be made to address these challenges, in terms of upholding men and women in their daily work as they work through the situations that arise, our priestly role is vital and yet not well recognised. Nor do I believe it is developed as well as it could be in our thinking and in our strategies to address these challenges.

Regarding pastoral care, it seems to me that the church is extremely active in this area. It is one that I see exercised daily by the church. It is also a role that often runs counter to the actions advocated by prophets. The tension between prophets and pastoral carers is a natural consequence whenever change is advocated and the challenge for the church is to make this tension constructive. This is not easy when the prophetic calls are cast in terms of moral absolutes and pastoral care in terms of immediate and real need.

An example of such a conflict would be between the need to return proper environmental flows of water to the Murray-Darling Basin versus care for the people who would lose their livelihoods in small country towns.

Both of the priestly functions recognise the eternal perspective of our life here on earth and raise our eyes above the immediate concerns that we are facing. We are working for a world that extends beyond the here and now and, through our

intercessions and our concern for those who will be affected, we need to remind those in the other roles not to lose that Jesus perspective.

Do we take our priestly roles seriously in our daily lives? Do we care and pray? Defend and support? Listen and uphold those around us? Family, colleagues, those we do not like?

Finally, there is a fourth role; that of counsellors; those who contribute to decisions out of their expertise, experience and thoughtful intelligence. Understanding the decision-making process and contributing to the issues involved, they share their wisdom.

Again we must ask ourselves, have we put to the service of God all those abilities, all those skills, all those lessons learned in the hard school of life, all those insights we have had?

So, what should our position as Christians be in this? I cannot see any one role here that is more Christian than any other. There are Christians participating in each of the roles I have outlined above: at various times we may be prophets, rulers, priests or counsellors. My only comment would be to paraphrase John the Baptist's answer when he was asked. 'What should we do then?' (Luke 3: 1-18).

'Prophets, speak your message forthrightly and with passion but watch your hyperbole and speak only to the truth. Be careful not to mislead. Watch that the righteousness of your cause does not unfairly impinge on the righteousness of other causes.

Rulers, make your decisions with the good of those who will be affected by them; be aware of the planet, its resources and values, and the impact your decisions will have. Strive to make your decisions capable of being implemented and durable. Remember in particular the poor and the vulnerable in making these decisions.

Priests, uphold all those involved in the decisions in your prayers, and pray for the outcomes that will emerge. Remind all continually that the situation they are working for is larger than individual desires. In large ways and small ways we are called to work towards the new creation promised in scripture. Remind them that we will all be held accountable one day to the creator of this planet and all that it contains and sustains.

Counsellors, use your knowledge, expertise and experience with care. Offer it carefully and judiciously to those involved, with an intelligent understanding of the decision making process, as unto God. Do not misuse your status and the regard with

which you may be held but remember humbly that all that you have is from God in the first place and that you are in a position of trust and privilege.’

For those interested, the environmental working group decided that when speaking to the wider Australian community our voice should be that of prophet, and when speaking to the church on environmental matters we had roles as both prophets and counsellors.

What roles are you filling at present in God’s service? How might you improve your service? What new roles might God be calling you to?

Based on R. Gijbers, http://www.iscast.org/journal/opinion/Gijbers_R_2010-12_Prophets_Kings_Priests_Counsellors