

The Prophetic Ministry

Jeremiah 4:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

Today's gospel reading from Luke picks up exactly where we left off last week. Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth and has just finished reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He has not only read from the Hebrew Scriptures, but has declared that they have been fulfilled in him. He is the one anointed by the Holy Spirit to set the oppressed free and bring good news to the poor.

Luke tells us that all spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Those present in the synagogue that day had heard about how Jesus had been teaching in Capernaum. They were obviously impressed with him, and maybe proud to claim the hometown boy who was making a name for himself. *Is this not Joseph's son?*, they ask, isn't he one of our own?

All could have proceeded very pleasantly with much back slapping, and crowds coming to hear this celebrity teacher, a son of their own village; but it didn't. Things turned very quickly and dramatically after Jesus revealed to them truth from their own scriptures, their own spiritual heritage, that they did not want to hear.

Having just quoted from Isaiah, Jesus goes on to align himself with two more prophets, Elijah and Elisha, thus firmly centring himself within the prophetic vocation and ministry of Israel. Throughout the generations Israel had failed to heed the Word of God spoken through the prophets, in fact they had rejected it. Jesus draws the attention of the men in the synagogue to the fact, that even though a prophet is rejected by his own people, God will use his servant to bless others, even Gentiles. A poor Gentile widow was blessed by having food and oil that did not run out because she welcomed and offered hospitality to Elijah. Naaman, a commander of the Syrian army, was cured of a terrible skin disease because he humbled himself before Elisha.

The suggestion that Gentiles could be welcomed and blessed by God was virtually blasphemous to a people who had become rigid in their laws of purity and their sense of privilege and entitlement as God's chosen people. These

were not words they wanted to hear, and so they sought swiftly and brutally, to silence the prophet who dared to speak them.

Before we are too quick to judge Israel in their rejection of the prophets, we must admit that we too, generally, do not like to hear the truth. We prefer to hear what we want to hear, what makes us feel good, what flatters us, enables us to justify our prejudices, what makes us feel comfortable.

When we ask someone whether a particular outfit makes us look fat – we don't really want to know if it does, we want to be told we look great. When we are reminded of our wasteful consumption of natural resources, many of us pretend we didn't hear, and continue to make choices based on convenience rather than shared responsibility and good stewardship. When someone has the courage to suggest that our need for control may be crippling our relationships with others, we often become defensive and don't want to know about it.

We live in a world of spin doctors, half-truths and deception; a world where advertisers, big business and the internet set the pace and the expectations we have of life; and so, we cannot sit in judgement upon others.

Our readings today lead us to reflect upon the meaning and power of the prophetic vocation and ministry. Our first reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah is a powerful and moving testament to the prophetic vocation or calling. The work of a prophet is not something one chooses to pick up and set down at will, it is not a career choice; it is a way of life, the essence of one's being and identity. As we read verses 4-10 in this first chapter, we learn that Jeremiah was brought into being for the very purpose of fulfilling the prophetic vocation. God says to Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

What a blessing, and what a calling!

The work of a prophet is to tell the truth, to speak the word of God into the world and into people's lives. The prophetic ministry, therefore, is one that

disturbs the comfortable and unsettles those in positions of power. It can only be done in the strength and power of God.

Jeremiah, like Jesus, speaks on behalf of the oppressed and those who are distressed; and like Jesus, Jeremiah would do battle with the religious establishment, secular rulers and his own people¹.

The life of a prophet is one no one would choose for themselves. To exercise a prophetic ministry is open oneself to rejection, ridicule, alienation, and that great fear of western culture, unpopularity.

But it is more than that. It is one thing to have convictions others do not share, but it is another to feel a deep heart breaking grief for others and to find the courage to speak even when they do not want to hear.

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. Jesus expressed deep compassion for the lost, the poor, the oppressed and also a deep sadness and anguish for those who would not turn to God.

Walter Brueggemann, one of my favourite biblical scholars and theologians, talks about the prophetic ministry having two vital characteristics, that of criticising and that of energising². The criticising is not a negative, destructive action, but one that identifies that things are not right, it is a grieving or mourning for the state of affairs, the situations people find themselves in, the choices they have made. It is an action that stems from a deep love and compassion for others, a desire that the truth be spoken and acknowledged, in order for people to be set free.

But the prophetic ministry involves more than truth telling, it is also about energising, and by that Brueggemann means that it is the role of the prophet to speak in ways that evoke newness, to speak freshly from the Word of God in ways that bring hope and transformation. Those who would exercise a prophetic ministry must be deeply rooted in the Word of God and the great

¹ Holyhead, V. *With Burning Hearts: Welcoming the Word in Year C*. John Garratt Publishing 2006

² Brueggemann, W. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Fortress Press 1978 chapters 3 and 4.

heritage of faith, if they are to be able to speak to the culture and perceptions of the current time.

The prophetic ministry is about speaking the truth in love, and then inspiring others to imagine new possibilities. It is about redefining the situation and bearing witness to a future not yet imagined.

The grieving and pain must come first, for without it, new life cannot come. The grief of the prophet is the grief of God; the hope of the prophet is the hope of God.

Through our baptism and new birth in Christ, we are given a prophetic vocation and ministry as a community of Christ. We too are to feel the grief and pain of God over the broken state of the world, to speak the words of truth in love, and to bring forth from God's Word, new life, real hope, the promise of new possibilities.

Together we are a community formed in and consecrated with, the Living Word of God. We have our origins in God's transforming Word to the darkness of chaos, to barren Sarah, to oppressed Egyptian slaves, to the prophet Jeremiah who wept for his people³. We have our fulfilment in the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Are we fearful of this prophetic calling? Yes.

Are we anxious that we might not have the ability to speak the word of God into the world? Yes.

Is it a calling we have no hope of fulfilling? No, for God says: Do not be afraid, for I am with you. (Jer1:8)

So let us find and claim our prophetic voice as the people of God and rejoice in our calling.

The Lord be with you.

³ Ibid. p66