

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 6th December 2020

Isaiah 40.1-11; Psalm 85.8-13; 2 Peter 3.8-15a; Mark 1.1-8

The primary task of a prophet, is to tell people about what God is doing. It is not really to say what God will do at some point in the future, or has done at some point in the past, though these perspectives often come into it. What the true prophet has a handle on, is what the current divine management policy is, in the context of his or her time. Prophecy is not really about the cryptic long term predictions so beloved in popular tales of fantasy and conspiracy theories. Neither can prophesy be something that is context free, something that can be plucked out of its original context and then reinterpreted verbatim for another age, however uncanny the words may sound in a new context.

Prophecy is about what God is actually doing in the here and now, and it is only because it is about the now that the prophet may see it. The true prophet pursues a vocation, a life, a calling; of becoming close to God, of being in touch with God. The result is that, as with good friends, the prophet gains a good understanding of what God is really up to. Of course it is more complicated than this. But in essence the prophet has a better handle than most, on current management policy. Moreover, as our first reading points out, unlike most human management, God takes the long view.

John the Baptist knows that God is doing a new thing. He knows that people need to get ready for it. He knows that they need to be open to the new thing that God is doing, and he is doing what he can to gee them up. He knows well enough that this new thing that God is doing is not primarily about himself, and he knows that his call to repentance is not going to be enough in itself. Something much greater is coming. Despite his impressive public profile, it's not about him.

Which is one reason John's ministry is in the desert. It is Jesus who will go to the towns and synagogues. And it is Jesus who will change the world. Not John. John the Baptist is a true prophet. He points to what God is doing, and only draws attention to himself in so far as this serves his message. His is the warm up act; no more, no less; for it remains true that without John, Jesus would not have been able to have the remarkable impact he did in just three short years.

The world needs more prophets like John. People who are in touch with the long view. People who are not caught up in the fashions and obsessions of the current day; desert people. The world needs more people who see how things are moving despite all the noise; people who are able to read the deeper signs of the times. The world needs such people who don't just read the signs of the times and surf them to grow rich themselves, but who see what God is doing and say to everyone, "Pay attention!" "To this!" "Start acting on this!" "Now!" The world needs more prophets like John, because humankind is really not very good at taking the long view.

Part of the call of the Church is to be prophetic. Did you know that we are called to be a company of prophets? But if we are to be true to this divine calling, it cannot be about just joining in with the progressive and woke causes of our day, or indeed just resisting them. Our call is to be more perceptive than that, to interpret what God is doing. That call has to

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be rooted in what God has always done, and above all it has to be rooted in the revelation of God in action in Jesus Christ. And what all this rootedness tells Christians, is that God's actions are saving acts. His saves people from themselves; he saves communities from oppression and poverty; and he saves nations and cultures from the corruptions of power. God's actions are often saving actions, and those who come to know God discover this in all sorts of unexpected ways.

The Church has no call to engage in prophesy which is not rooted in the mission of Jesus. When Church leaders wade into politics, this is a very important guide. Of course prophesy is often political; if it is about human communities how could it be otherwise? But for such prophesy to be authentic, and to be heard as prophesy and not just politics, it needs to address what we think God is actually doing in the situation. Interestingly, it cannot be just about what we think God ought to be doing, but in what his current saving actions actually are.

Often this is easier to perceive in history. I think quite a good example is this country's role in the Second World War in Europe. The enduring interest in our nation in telling this story is not just nostalgia, for it is a story of being saved. And it is a story of the role this country played in saving the world from an evil, a very real corruption of power, from the evil of Nazi ideology which had gripped one of the most civilised nations on earth. In truth it was indeed a rescue mission in many senses. I think we do sense the hand of God in it, even if this is not often mentioned today. I think as a nation we remain deeply grateful for that deliverance, and I think that it is right that we should be.

When the story of this current test, the Covid-19 pandemic, comes to be told, there will I am sure be an enduring sense of being saved by the science. The extraordinary thing is the way this critical expertise has been ready to respond with unprecedented speed. And also it is extraordinary that most people have been so ready to follow the rules in ways that have really surprised the planners. We thought we had become a nation of bolshie individualists, and yet the nation has come together to fight the virus in remarkable ways. I, for one, do see the saving hand of God in this, both in the spirit of the people and in the timely science.

And what about St Mary-le-Tower today? What is our prophesy about God's saving actions, here in the town centre of Ipswich? What is the prophesy of other churches in Ipswich? Amid the high street gloom, the Church is increasingly a beacon of light. Town pastors save people amid the wild nightlife of this town on Friday and Saturday nights. The Winter Night Shelter saves people who have no home. Many faiths are supporting food banks. And we, here at St Mary-le-Tower, are investing deeply in the future of Ipswich Town Centre, in music, in young people, in hospitality, in heritage, and in community engagement.

These too are prophetic actions. They proclaim our trust that amid the gloom God has not forgotten Ipswich; that there is new life, and we are ready part of it in our small ways. It is costly; the call to be prophetic is always costly. But our prophesy is that God is at work in this our town and we at St Mary-le-Tower are learning to be part of it, and to have confidence in it, and to be prophetic in action about it. Amen.

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