

23 February 2013

Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 2 (Jer. 2.4-13)

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Last week I asked whether a contemplative community might have a particular vocation, a particular gift to offer the world, and I began to explore the relationship between the contemplative and the prophetic vocations. I suggested that a true prophet is always in some sense a contemplative, and that a true contemplative is always in some sense a prophet – a ‘seer’ – someone who ‘sees’ reality more deeply because less blinded by illusion, less caught up in their own version of reality, and so capable of truthful speech and action. This week I want to continue this exploration by reflecting more deeply on the nature of the prophetic vocation. Who is the prophet? What is the prophetic task and context?

Let’s start by seeing what we can learn from Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s context is the historical crisis of the last days of Judah, a crisis which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 587 BCE. This was, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, ‘the dominant and shaping event of the entire OT’.¹ Historically and politically speaking, events were precipitated by the collapse of the Assyrian Empire towards the end of the 600s BCE and its replacement by the Babylonian Empire under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians now ruled in the north of Judah; to the south, the Egyptians held sway, and Judah was precariously placed as a buffer between them. Over 30 or so years, Brueggemann says, the kings of Judah, a weak leadership, ‘vacillated between Babylonian and Egyptian alliances’, until

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p.1.

finally the Babylonians got sick of this 'political double-mindedness and moved against Jerusalem to end its political independence'. They conquered. The leaders of Jerusalem and many prominent citizens were sent into exile in Babylon, and Jerusalem and its surrounds became a Babylonian vassal state.

The historical and political reading of this crisis is not, however, the book of Jeremiah's primary interest. These realities are of course known to, experienced by the prophet, they provide the *occasion* for prophetic speech, but the deeper 'reading' of the situation that Jeremiah offers is theological. The underlying issues are, for him, not finally geo-political or strategic, but spiritual: Judah's destruction is the fruit of its faithlessness, its forsaking the 'fountain of living water' for 'cracked cisterns that can hold no water'. So – the first thing we learn from Jeremiah is that the prophet in the Hebrew tradition interprets reality theologically. If God is ultimate reality, and God's way is the way of truth and life, then to live at cross purposes with that reality is always going to be destructive. You can't live against the grain of life, without there being effects – and these effects show themselves personally, in the experience of individuals, and they show themselves publicly, in the experience of whole communities, ecologies, and political and ecclesial systems.

But this raises a large question. How do we know what is the 'grain of God's life', or what being faithful to God's reality calls for? There are many I would consider to be *false* prophets – those who discern in natural disasters or disease God's supposed punishment for immorality or heresy, and who pronounce hellfire and judgement accordingly. Once we start interpreting public reality in theological categories, how do we know we are not doing damage in these kinds of ways? How do we know we are not simply inscribing our personal prejudices on a cosmic scale?

Jeremiah makes his theological interpretation of reality on the basis of three basic articles of faith. First, the nature of God is to liberate – this faith is rooted in the

memory of the Exodus. God has freed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and has called it to be a nation that reflects God's own way of being-for-freedom and life. The Law is given to this community to ensure that practices of justice and mercy structure all its relationships, especially with the most vulnerable – with the sojourner and stranger, the widow and the orphan in the land. Jeremiah's second theological premise is that God yearns passionately for his people's wholeness and their communion with God and each other, God yearns for their company. And third, for Jeremiah this yearning love of God for his people means that, despite their faithlessness and denial, there is always the possibility of newness and restoration – there is always ground for hope, which lies not in objective historical reality, not in the merits or efforts of the people themselves, but entirely in the free gift and purpose of God. Do you hear the echoes of the resurrection narratives here? God frees his people from death and gives new life: the early Church, suggests Brueggemann, interpreted the story of Jesus precisely through this prophetic faith.²

So for Jeremiah, as our reading today makes clear, the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians is connected to their forgetting of who God is and so of who they are called to be. They did not say, "Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?' ... The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me ...'. Yet, the prophet 'sees' that God's love for this people continues, and so he has God speak in the voice of a spurned lover: 'What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and because wrong in themselves?' And it is in this yearning love of God ultimately (and as we will see in coming weeks), that the prophet discerns a basis for hope and the possibility of new life for Israel.

² Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p.26.

Well, what has all this to do with us? What of this ‘theological reading’ of reality can inform a prophetic vocation today? Does it have something to contribute to our engagement with some of the manifestly destructive patterns in *our* public life?

Let me say first what I don’t think we can do. We can’t point to a particular decision (abortion law in Victoria) or a supposed moral transgression (almost always a sexual one) as a direct cause of natural disaster, disease, or public collapse, and as a license to blame the victim. I *do* think, however, we can become attentive to what in ourselves and in our common life is inconsistent with faithfulness to the basic reality which is God within and among us. We can notice the disposition of our hearts, and we can realise that what is inconsistent with God’s liberating and reconciling life ultimately has consequences. This I take it how Jesus approaches these matters. When, for example, he is told of the death of certain sacrilegious Galileans ‘whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices’, he asks the crowd: ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?’ [i.e. don’t blame the victim] ‘No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did’ (Luke 13.1-5) [i.e. don’t think that ‘falseness’, being misaligned with God, has no consequences].

When we refuse to ‘share with justice the resources of the earth’, when greed and hoarding (symptoms of our forgetting of God) mean that some of us accumulate more than we need, while others lack basic necessities – then this spiritual sickness has concrete effects. Immediate effects for the poorest of the poor; but longer term effects too – from social unrest and resentment, to outright revolution and social collapse. When we refuse God’s invitation to communion with the whole created order, when in pride and self-sufficiency we fail to see ourselves as only one part of the whole in our

fragile and beautiful world, then this spiritual sickness has concrete effects – for the polar bears first, but it won't be too long before it's whole ecosystems and ourselves along with them. Jeremiah expresses this basic misalignment in terms of unfaithfulness and disobedience; we might more readily speak of dwelling in illusion, living in 'la-la' land. But either way the point is the same – you can't be at cross-purposes with reality for too long, before reality lets you know.

Many people can warn us about the various social and environmental dangers we court – scientists and policy makers, sociologists and international lawyers – and they can help us discern how we might respond to the particular challenges we face. The *prophet*, however, is called to give voice to the deeper malaise that is at the source of these problems, to name our basic misalignment with reality which is ultimately always a spiritual and theological matter. The prophet is called by God to be in touch with and to remind people of *these* truths, to call us back into right relationship with God and each other, and to stand courageously for the possibility of newness and hope even in the midst of despair. As we shall see next week, this is not a comfortable calling – but it is, I am suggesting, part of *our* calling as a contemplative community.