

Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 6 (Jer. 20. 7-9)

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These words of Jeremiah express an extraordinary experience of what it means to 'labour under necessity'. The prophet feels himself overwhelmed by God, enticed (seduced, even) and unable to resist; even though he has become a laughingstock, taunted and derided for what he says, he cannot cease from speaking God's words and acting them out – and if he tries to hold them in, well then 'within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'.

Jeremiah's words remind me of Jesus' testimony to this same kind of experience: 'I have a baptism with which to be baptized', says Jesus, 'and what stress I am under until it is completed!' (Luke 12.49-50). And of Martin Luther, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. To be caught up in God's purposes, to know in human life the urgency of divine necessity, is a wondrous, exhilarating, terrifying and above all *mysterious* thing. At one level, it seems so unlikely – can this really be happening, to me, to us. Is it really true that I can 'do no other', that I 'must speak'? And yet, at another level, it is undeniable – or denied only at the cost of massive suppression, untruthfulness and deathliness. And there is something in us that *knows* when this is so. 'Within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'.

This Lent, we have been exploring the relationship between the prophetic and contemplative vocations, and the prophet Jeremiah has been our guide. Because of this, it's easy to think of the prophet as a charismatic individual – and definitely not me.

‘Here I am Lord, send her’. But in this final reflection on our theme, I want to ask about the possibility of being a prophetic *community* – a community with a vocation to see through the illusions that govern our political and social life, a vocation to communicate God’s judgement and lament over false ways of living, and to live from hope in such a way that new possibilities may be realised in the world. I want to ask about Benedictus and the prophetic vocation of this contemplative community.

Before we go any further, however, let me head off what I think are a couple of dangers in this exploration.

The experience of necessity, under which Jeremiah and Jesus and Luther labour, shows us that true prophetic speech is never, in the first instance, our idea. To find oneself called to speak or act prophetically is almost always something we resist, something that makes us feel profoundly vulnerable and exposed. None of the prophets wants to do it. And this means, I think, that a community can’t simply *decide* to take on the mantle of being prophetic – in a slightly self-conscious and almost inevitably self-righteous kind of way. When I talk about exploring our prophetic vocation, I am not suggesting we suddenly become strident campaigners for some agenda about which we have pre-formed opinions and in a way that makes us feel relevant, or edgy, or ‘courageous’.

There’s a second danger to beware of. From the Old Testament prophets, we derive a confrontational model of prophetic vocation – it’s prophet vs king. It’s often the same with those we think of as prophets in the history of the church. We see Martin Luther confronting establishment religion; Martin Luther King confronting establishment racism, and so on. But, as Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, with the marginalisation of the church in ‘secular’ society and its dramatic loss of credibility (think of the abuse scandals, not to mention the loony Christian right) this approach to prophetic vocation is increasingly difficult to pull off and without great social effect. ‘A

confrontational model', he says, 'assumes that the "prophetic voice" has enough clout, either social or moral, to gain a hearing. Currently, the ... churches lack much of that authority, so that the old confrontational approach is largely ineffectual posturing'. A faithful community may still be laid under necessity of a prophetic kind – still called to proclaim God's truth in a world or a church of lies, but the question of how that call is lived out is one that 'invites immense imagination'.

So, given these dangers and pitfalls, what is possible by way of prophetic vocation today? How might an authentic, God-driven expression of counter-cultural, hope-filled consciousness be heard?

One answer to this has been discovered by many Christian communities in practice. Take a community like L'Arche, for example, where those with physical and mental disabilities of various kinds live alongside those without disabilities, in friendship. In these communities, the 'able' do not simply care for the 'dis-abled'. All belong equally to the community, all are given the dignity of giving as well as receiving love and service. Here is prophetic action – not simply social service. Without a word said, such communities effectively judge much contemporary social life, revealing in practice (and not just in lip-service) the full humanity of all people, and showing what it means to take that seriously. It is prophetic action because it offers the experience of true community and so begins to realise *now* the hope-filled promise of God's future, where all things will be reconciled. There are other examples of this kind of prophetic activity (including Covenant Care here, and Safe Shelter at St Columba's) – which not only offer services to those who need it, but enact judgement and hope in the midst of our usual competitive and individualistic way of life. They make visible a radically alternative consciousness.

Let me suggest two other expressions of the prophetic vocation which I believe are being called forth today, particularly from contemplative communities.

In our time, the practice of communal silence is itself be a form of prophetic speech. We live in a wash of instant opinion and comment – we only have to see the flood of tweeting, blogging, and half-formed commentary unleashed this past week. We live in a time when speaking is often spinning, and clichéd, jargon-ridden language has lost touch with the depths of human experience. This is as true of religious language as anything else. Rowan Williams has said that too much ‘Christian language actually fails to transform the world’s meaning because it neglects or trivializes or evades aspects of the human’, and he goes on to speak about our awkwardness about sex, our glibness about death, and avoidance of the reality of suffering. And the point is that all such ‘talk’, political or religious, is ultimately in the service of the ego’s identity, security and self-image. We all want to have ‘our say’.

In this context, to believe that being silent may be part of our prophetic vocation is not to get us spiritual introverts off the hook. It is simply that authentic speech, speech with some capacity to communicate God and transform life, cannot be separated from listening and must rise up from deeper than our egos. The true prophet, remember, speaks only when she ‘must’, when the word rises up ‘like fire in the bones’ as a word that can no longer be contained. So, we are not talking about *being* silenced, the silence of defeat or hopelessness, but the *chosen* silence of listening and expectancy. A contemplative community learns to wait on God before we speak and in doing so, in refusing easy or glib chatter, reminds others of the very possibility of deeper speech, authentic, God-centred speech. For ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways’, says the Lord.

How else might a prophetic vocation be expressed by a contemplative community? Well, I suspect that, in place of the old model of confrontation, in our day it is *conversation* that is the most radically prophetic approach to the transformation of life. In the face of strident political denunciation, lobbying and manipulation of public

opinion, imagine opening up spaces for genuine, non-threatened conversation. Instead of making another wrong, we might learn to be curious about how it is for them; instead of trying to win the argument, we might create spaces that are hospitable enough for another to speak their truth and then learn to hear themselves and others into ever deeper attentiveness and truth-telling.

I believe that a contemplative community, which seeks to rest deeper into the ground that is God, is a community becoming ever more capable of being with difference non-anxiously, non-defensively, with no territory of its own to defend. It is thus a community with the capacity to host and welcome real conversation (remembering that conversation involves always the possibility of conversion – in either direction). In our time, it seems to me that conversation and not lobbying is a practice that is truly faith-filled and hope-bearing, truly prophetic.

As church, we are entering into Holy Week, journeying with Jesus into Jerusalem as he yields himself to the necessity of the way he must go. As Benedictus, we have been reflecting this Lent on our vocation, in the light of the prophetic imagination. I have written to you all a letter which builds in part on these reflections. I wanted to offer you my sense of our life together so far, and share what I sense is emerging for us now and in the next while. I hope that in reading it, you find resonances with your own experience and hopes for our future, that you will let me know your thoughts ... and that together we may allow ourselves to be enticed by the God who draws us always on the way of cross and resurrection, ever closer to the mystery of divine love.