

2 March 2013

Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 3 (Jer. 8.18-9.3)

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I suspect we have an ambivalent attitude to the person of the prophet. On the one hand, I think of Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Aung San Suu Kyi and the suffragettes and their courageous and costly stand against oppressive systems, their refusal to let their communities forget the plight of the afflicted or collude with oppression. On the other hand, I think of those who seem somehow self-consciously 'righteous' about whatever their cause is – the guy at the street corner calling us to repent, the whistle-blower who has become obsessive and paranoid, the activist who is so 'right on' as to be positively painful to be around.

Being a prophet, taking a prophetic stance, is a dangerous vocation – not only because it might get you imprisoned or assassinated or cast into exile, but also because my stand on behalf of righteousness can easily turn into a stand for my own self-righteousness; my call to unsettle cheap compromise become no more than habitual prickliness and anti-establishment reaction. And when we read bits of the prophet Jeremiah, this tension can seem uncomfortably close to the surface.

Chapter 7 of the Book of Jeremiah is known as the Temple Sermon – and here Jeremiah's street corner proclivities are on full display. There is a fierce denunciation of Jerusalem's complacency, its unthinking confidence in its historical identity and routine religious observance. Standing in the gate of the Temple itself, Jeremiah calls on all who enter to 'amend your ways and your doings ... Do not trust in these deceptive words:

“This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”. Do not think, in other words, that worship alone will save you (I go to church every Sunday) or that claiming your lineage as God’s chosen will guarantee your life. (‘I am happy to say that all my children “know the Lord”’). For unless there is justice and truth and mercy among you, then these words are empty and God’s choice of you is made void, Jeremiah proclaims.

And, in chapter 8, comes the wonderfully satisfying pronouncement of judgement: ‘How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us”, when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie? ... Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace”, when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord’ (Jer. 8.8-12). Especially when you’ve been done over by a hierarchy of some kind, there is visceral pleasure in declaiming these words!

Well, but what makes this kind of prophetic speech more than the cheap shot of the street evangelist, the venting of the prophet’s spleen? What authorises it as authentic and potentially transforming address? What makes it the ‘word of the Lord’?

All true prophetic speech, Walter Brueggemann says, seeks to break through falsity and injustice – which includes breaking through our numbness to and denial of our falsity and injustice. That is why prophetic speech may be dramatic, hyperbolic, a ‘hard word’ – it’s got to cut through massive resistance. In the context of ancient Israel, Jeremiah seeks to cut through what Brueggemann calls the ‘royal consciousness’ and the temple ideology. The kings and ruling elites, the priests and people alike have been

acting as though their peace and prosperity, their righteousness, are unconditionally guaranteed by God, that Jerusalem is inviolate because it is God's own city. The whole society is invested in this version of reality and, because of that ideology, ritual worship of God has been disconnected from listening and obedience, has become (in effect) idolatrous. A myth of God's eternal presence, the delusion that somehow they 'possess' God, simply reinforces the power of the ruling class and undergirds oppressive social relationships with impunity. In our context, we might think of our massive investment in the delusion of the endless economic growth, our idolatrous trust in the power of technology to save us from any need to attend to the justice of our basic relationships with the earth and with our fellow human beings.

To all such triumphalist and complacent religion as ideology, the prophet utters a resounding 'no'. But what is crucial is the tone of the prophet's voice. Sometimes it does sound like rage pure and simple, frustration and condemnation. But in the Hebrew tradition, *always* the larger context for prophetic judgement is anguish and lament. The prophet *aches* for the deluded people; he *longs* for them to turn back; he pleads to God for them and he shares their underlying experience of alienation and despair – even if they themselves are too numb to be aware that that is their deepest experience. The prophet does not protect herself, is not removed from the pain of a world out of joint – and so takes into her own body the pain of the deluded ones as well as the oppressed ones.

So it is in our reading for today. 'My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick'. The people call, 'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?' They are finally noticing something is wrong, and yet the prophet knows it is already too late, something has already been irrevocably broken. 'For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me'. The prophet expresses the pain of God too: 'Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?' and it as

though the tears the prophet needs to weep for all this pain are forever insufficient. 'O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night ...'. Except, and this is the extraordinary thing, maybe this is not the prophet alone speaking, but God's own self consumed by anguish and grief: 'O that I had in the desert a lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord'. And here, we may recognise the anguished voice of Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem, some 500 years later: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'

Ultimately, I think, it is this willingness to share the pain of the people, including the pain of their intransigence, the pain of being numb and being false, that distinguishes the true prophet from the false. This solidarity, this costly 'being-with' the suffering of the world (or the church) is what distinguishes those who've decided for themselves what's amiss and harangue the populace from the sidelines, from those who are called into the dangerous place of speaking for the God who loves us and longs for our wholeness, and so suffers with us our refusal of authentic relationship. This is why the early church recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of the prophets, the one who bears the sins of the world, not hating or rejecting us, but in the anguished and divine hope that we might finally recognise what we are doing and turn and live.

And this is why, for us, the contemplative and prophetic vocations go together. We *cannot* be with, bear with, the anguish, the lies and the violence of the world on our own – we either lash out in rage, frustration, condemnation or we deny, we go to sleep, we pretend. To wake up to the reality of so much of our life together, to know the depth

of grief that needs expression, and to let it wound our hearts too – that is the source of true prophetic speech, speech that can proclaim promise and hope, that can heal and liberate as well as judge. But this is possible only in the prayer of the heart – where in silent trust we offer ourselves to listen deeply for God’s truth and where we discover for ourselves that we may be pierced and yet comforted, dying and yet alive, sustained by a love that is stronger than death, a fountain of living water.