



16 March 2013

Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 5 (Jer. 32. 1-15)

Sarah Bachelard

What makes possible authentic hope in a world beset by looming disaster and a community responding with collective self-deception, avoidance and complacency? What makes the *proclamation* of hope in such a context anything other than collusion in falsehood and wishful thinking? For us, as much as for the prophet Jeremiah, this is an urgent question.

Last week we began to explore the shift in Jeremiah's preaching from lament to possibility, from judgement to promise. We learnt from him that you don't get to hope by bypassing pain – both prophet and people must learn to live in and through all that is unresolved, unchosen and painful about their present circumstances. They must be prepared for the long haul. And, we learnt, you don't get to authentic hope by making it up. False prophets invent consolations in order to make themselves and everyone else feel better. But when the true prophet speaks a word of hope, it is *God's* word. How do we know? Because the true prophet has stayed close to the reality of grief and suffering and powerlessness, and not evaded it. It is precisely and only here, that he hears against all expectation and rationality the whisper of another possibility, and the invitation to entrust himself to it.

What this means is something very important. It means, as Walter Brueggemann has said, that true prophetic hope 'is not grounded in [the] sense that things are going to get better, nor in the notion that things [are] evolving in a desired direction. ...

[Prophetic] hope [has] an independence from the present, because the new world [is] a gift from God, who [acts] in unqualified freedom'.¹ In other words, true prophetic hope is given by God and sourced, not in our circumstances, but in who God is for us. God's desire is always to make whole, restore and liberate. It is intimacy with this hope-engendering God that forms the prophet as an agent of transformation in the present.

How is this word of God, this word of hope, spoken in the human world? How is it communicated, so that it brings about transformation, new life?

Poetry is one way of communicating this kind of counter-factual hope. That seems surprising to our pragmatic, efficiency oriented sensibilities – our prose dominated world. But in the great literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, sublime poetic visions generate imaginative horizons that open up radically new possibilities for living. So, in the midst of exile and desolation, Jeremiah imagines a future of abundant harvest, the people of Israel singing aloud over grain, wine and oil, and life 'like a watered garden' where 'they shall never languish again' (Jer. 31.12). In verse, he offers resources that enable his people to journey through the present time without falling into despair – 'See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour together; a great company, they shall return here' (Jer.31.3). Jeremiah's poetry holds open the space of impossible possibility when what is visible is only death.

The prophet Isaiah likewise offers to a dis-integrated people a vision of radical renewal and belonging, proclaiming that every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, the rough places plain and the crooked straight, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, he says, and all people see it together (Isa. 40.4-5). And if we think this kind of sublime poetic vision is merely fanciful, with no power to transform

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), pp.181-182.

the real world, then it's instructive to read the 20th century prophet Martin Luther King's speech 'I have a dream' where he declaims these very words of Isaiah to a dis-integrated America. 'This is our hope', he goes on to say in his own poetry. 'With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day'.²

In the beginning, God spoke and the world came into being. The word of God, word sourced in God, creates worlds. Poetic prophetic speech is a deeply revolutionary matter.

Prophetic hope is communicated also in deeds that enact trust in the promised, new reality. This is how Jeremiah speaks hope in our reading today. As the Babylonians besiege Jerusalem, and while he's under house arrest in King Zedekiah's palace for endangering Jerusalem's morale, Jeremiah is made an offer by his cousin Hanamel. 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth'. As Eugene Peterson has pointed out – this is a crazy time to be investing in Judean real estate. The Babylonian army is encamped on it, Jeremiah is in prison and Jerusalem on the verge of being overrun and finally sent into exile.³ Jeremiah is being asked to buy a field it is likely he will never see, on which he will never plant an olive tree, or build a house or prune a vine. And he does. He weighs out the seventeen shekels of silver for the purchase price, he signs and seals the deed, and gets it witnessed. Then he gives the sealed deed of purchase to Baruch, also in the presence of witnesses, and says before them all: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds ... and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for

² Martin Luther King, 'I Have a Dream' (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/martin-luther-kings-speech-dream-full-text/story?id=14358231&page=2>, accessed 15 March 2013).

³ Eugene Peterson, *The Quest: For Life at its Best* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), p.172.

a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land' (Jer. 32.14-15).

Writes Peterson, 'What we call hoping is often only wishing ... Biblical hope, though, is an act – like buying a field in Anathoth. Hope acts on the conviction that God will complete the work that he has begun even when the appearances, especially when the appearances, oppose it'.⁴ Jeremiah's enacted hope, Peterson says, 'made the word of God visible, made a foothold of it for anyone who wanted to make a way out of chaotic despair into the ordered wholeness of salvation ... Hope-determined actions participate in the future that God is bringing into being'.⁵ They are actions that begin to realise God's future, now.

The Eucharist is a hope-determined action like this – participating in the future that God is bringing into being. It was a hope-determined action for Jesus, when in the face of his imminent betrayal by his friends and his own death, he enacted God's deathless fellowship with humanity. It is hope-determined action for us, when we entrust ourselves to the promise that (despite everything) we are one body because we share one bread, and that even as dis-integrated human beings we are already forgiven, made one with the very life of God by eating Christ's body and the blood.

This is how worship is transformative and why it is dangerous to oppressive regimes. Speaking the peace, sharing the Eucharist – these are profoundly subversive and counter-cultural acts. They remind us that what we think of as the 'real' world – its culture of competition and striving to get ahead, its default imagination of every man for himself and its fear of death – none of it is necessary, none of it is inevitable. Prophets teach us, Jesus the prophet shows us that God's imagination is other than this. God promises communion and not rivalry, grace and not payback, life and not death,

⁴ Peterson, *The Quest*, p.176.

⁵ Peterson, *The Quest*, pp.177-178.

hope not despair. We share in this imagination, we help it to be realised, every time we entrust ourselves in word and deed to living from that future, living as if it were true in the face of all that contradicts it.

And I wonder, what might that look like now in your life and in mine?