

Prophets in the Tragic Gap (Hosea 11. 1-9)

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What do prophets do and how do they matter for the well-being of a people, a society, a culture? What could it mean to imagine a community – perhaps a community like ours – as having a prophetic vocation?

In biblical understanding, a prophet is someone who hears and speaks ‘the word of the Lord’. Prophets don’t just talk *about* God or even *to* God. Much more dangerously, prophets purport to speak *for* God, *on behalf* of God. By means of their words, actions and lives, prophets are people called to convey what God would say, to mediate the divine.¹ This, when you think about it, is quite an extraordinary vocation. And I want to draw out a number of understandings or assumptions that are built into this whole tradition of biblical prophecy.

The first is the belief that God, the ground and source of all being, is communicative. According to our faith tradition, we’re not simply thrown into a world that is mute. God speaks, and human beings are capable of hearing or receiving this speech. We don’t need to imagine an old man in the sky talking to us. The metaphor of God speaking points to a range of experience – the ‘still, small voice’, the deep intuition of the heart, the awakening of yearning, the sense that can arise in us of being led or of necessity. We don’t have to anthropomorphise God in order to conceive of God ‘speaking’. What the phrase names is something like the experience of being drawn into answerability or responsiveness; I feel myself addressed, called from beyond myself.

The second understanding built into the tradition of biblical prophecy is that God speaks (so to speak) in characteristic ways. The people of Israel believe they have learned over their history and through their collective experience that the word

¹ See Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), p.9.

of God is uttered in service of life and love. It's never wantonly destructive, chaotic or demoralising. Rather, it's inherently creative and redemptive. This doesn't mean it's not challenging. In fact, quite the reverse. Where life and love are diminished by injustice, where people are given over to illusion or cruelty, then the word of God will sound as challenge, accusation, even – metaphorically – as 'wrath'. God speaks through the prophets so as to uncover falsehood, give voice to the voiceless, convict the oppressor and call for repentance. It's often not comfortable. But, in biblical understanding, this divine critique is never the end of the matter. For always and ultimately God's word acts to enable reconciliation, restoration, renewal of life.

And this means, third, that the prophet who is called to listen for and communicate God's word, must undergo a profound tension. On the one hand, prophets face up to 'what is'; they must see the truth as God sees. And this means that wherever human cultures are organised to privilege some at the expense of others and to act in death-dealing ways, the first expression of prophetic speech will be critical. Walter Brueggemann speaks of the necessary dismantling of '*static triumphalism*' and the '*politics of oppression and exploitation*'.²

Yet, if the prophet speaks only critique, denunciation, judgement – then they will not have faithfully communicated the whole word of God. There are those inclined to call themselves prophets who are just grumpy and perpetually outraged. But true prophets speak the word of the One who is by nature merciful and compassionate, creating and recreating, and who longs for the whole world's healing. The prophet purporting to speak for God must therefore not only communicate judgement of injustice, but also the love in which all things and all people are held – despite everything.

This is what Hosea is doing in the passage we just heard. Brueggemann has described these nine verses as 'among the most remarkable oracles in the entire prophetic literature'.³ Hosea starts off by expressing God's sorrow at Israel's refusal

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), p.7.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.218.

of love and vocation: 'The more I called them, the more they went away from me', laments the Lord. The prophet goes on to imagine God's righteous anger, God's threat to give up on such a recalcitrant people: 'They shall return to Egypt [that is to slavery] and be conquered by an alien empire – 'Assyria shall be their king'. And yet, immediately it's as if God has a change of heart. The oracles culminate in God's helpless expression of a compassion that will not be withheld: 'How can I give you up ... How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger ... for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath'. Here, says Brueggemann, 'the poetic tradition of Hosea reaches down into ... depths that move past any simple formula of disobedience and punishment or any other quid pro quo'.⁴ It is a disclosure of God's grace – the steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases.

Over these past few weeks we've seen that the primary subject matter of biblical prophecy concerns ancient Israel. The oracles rail against injustice in the land; they lament the people's rocky relationship with God and God's law; they interpret the nation's vulnerability to conquest theologically, as a means divine chastisement and a calling to national repentance. These aren't our concerns. Yet it seems to me that the basic elements of the prophetic vocation distilled by this tradition hold true.

Prophecy, now as then, is about listening for and communicating a sense of answerability that's grounded in the nature of things. It's about expressing the clear apprehension of wrong without losing sight of the embrace of a love beyond reason. And it's about learning to bear the pain of being present to and speaking from the whole of it. Prophets must take their stand in what Parker Palmer has called 'the tragic gap' – the gap between how things are and how they might be – without flipping merely into outrage or bitterness on one side, or into wishful thinking and cheap grace on the other. They must hold the tension and tread God's way of suffering, reconciling love.

⁴ Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.219.

How do prophets matter for a society? Only those who can abide in the tragic gap in this way are capable of social criticism which is both confronting and truth-telling, and also fundamentally merciful, generous, grounded in solidarity and oriented towards mutual well-being and sharedness of life. We might think of those like Martin Luther King Jr, Desmond Tutu, Sister Helen Prejean. And conversely, without those willing to give themselves to suffer in the tragic gap, social critique tends to degenerate into a death-dealing cul-de-sac of accusation, blame and relentless competition for the moral high ground. A cul-de-sac our society knows all too well.

But if this is what's distinctive about the prophetic vocation, what enables the prophet to abide in this place? How can they go on suffering the pain of a wounded world while keeping faith that, in Rowan Williams' words, 'our present pain is not the whole of reality, that behind it is a more final fact, God's vulnerable love drawing us forward'?⁵ From a Christian perspective, what enables us to remain in this cruciform place, this dark night, is the faith that God is 'in our pain and protest'. And I think we can come to know this for ourselves through the practice of radical, self-surrendering prayer. For somehow, as we daily give ourselves and the pain we bear to God, trusting, empty and poor in spirit, what grows in us is strength to endure and a compassion like God's, warm and tender. Sometimes too hope erupts unaccountably within, 'the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11.1). 'From the middle of the night', Williams writes, 'we recognize the [ultimacy] of God's mercy and acceptance'.⁶

And it seems to me that in virtue of our practice of self-surrendering contemplative prayer, a community like ours does share a prophetic vocation. I don't mean we all run around making pronouncements and speaking truth to power – those some of us may. I do mean that all of us are being called to live in the tragic gap and to tread the way of suffering, reconciling love, consenting to undergo the

⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.

⁶ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, p.22.

tension between what is and what may be in service of the world's healing and our own. Jeanette Mathews has said that the goal of prophetic literature is the transformation of the prophet's audience into actors.⁷ May we then learn to listen and to live so as to enable God's justice, mercy and compassion at work in our midst.

⁷ Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, p.70.