

Where have all the Prophets gone?



Today, it seems to me, we are awash with people who tell us exactly what they think, perhaps having imbibed Descartes' maxim, 'I think, therefore I am.' And I am certainly aware, as I write this, that I could be falling into the same trap!

But where are the people today, among God's flock, who share with us, not what they think or what their opinions are, but what they have **seen**, what God has **shown** them? This is at the heart, I believe, of the gift, calling or ministry of the prophet/prophetess. Prophets are 'seers', and today, when perhaps they are needed more than ever, they seem to be in such short supply.

Not so throughout the Bible.

Isaiah writes, "In the year that King Uzziah died (739 B.C.) I **saw** the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." (Is. 6:1).

At the beginning of **Jeremiah's** prophetic ministry the Lord said to him, "What do you **see**, Jeremiah?", and Jeremiah replied, "I **see** the branch of an almond tree." And the Lord said, "You have **seen** correctly." Then the Lord said to him again, "What do you **see**?" and Jeremiah answered, "I **see** a boiling pot tilting away from the north."

God then explains to Jeremiah the significance of what he has been shown and prepares him to speak to the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land – a wide-ranging, but mostly blind, deaf and obstinate audience. Prophecy often seems to come in through the eye as pictures, then into the ear as words, and finally out through the mouth.

At the beginning of **Ezekiel's** prophetic ministry he says, "the heavens were opened and I **saw** visions of God." (1:1) And again, "I **looked and I saw** a windstorm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light." (1:4) In the rest of the chapter, Ezekiel goes on to describe in detail 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.'

Only after Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had seen correctly, were they called, commissioned and sent to speak. If they hadn't seen anything, would they have had anything worthwhile to say?

And the sending is important. God said to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah replied, "Here am I. Send me." God said to Jeremiah, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem." God said to Ezekiel, "I am sending you to the Israelites."

If God thinks we might not go, he might not show!

Which brings me to another prophet, Amos. Time after time, Amos describes what the Lord **showed** him: 'swarms of locusts', 'judgment by fire', 'the Lord standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb-line in his hand', 'a basket of ripe fruit' (Amos 7:1,4,7, 8:1&2).

And it is in the book of Amos that we find one of the most remarkable, yet seemingly forgotten, verses about prophecy in the whole Bible, **"Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets." (3:7)**

Can there be any revelation of God's plan without prophecy?

Perhaps not, and so God's last word to us in the Bible is itself a beautiful, revelatory prophecy; with blessings promised to those who read it, hear it and take it to heart (Rev. 1:3) and severe penalties for those who add to it or subtract from it (Rev. 22:18&19).

So What is the Role of the Prophet?

They are a man, or a woman, called by God to pass on to other people what He has shown them, to speak the words He has given them, and, in some cases, to act them out (Jer. 13:1-11; Ezek. 5:1-4) or write them down (Hab. 2:2; Rev. 1:19).

These illustrated words may be directed to those who are God's people, those who aren't, or to both. They may be intended for an individual, a group, a church or a nation.

They may be a forthtelling of God's word for the now, or a foretelling of God's word for the future ~ sometimes both.

God uses prophecy to warn people, to call them to repentance, to help them to prepare for what will happen, to guide them and to build them up and encourage them in their faith.

What are some of the reasons why the gift, calling or ministry of Prophecy seems to have fallen largely into disuse if not even into disrepute?

1. It is often confused with Teaching.

I think this is a very common error. Although there is some overlap, the New Testament always differentiates between teaching on the one hand and prophecy on the other.

In Rms. 12: 6&7 we read that Christ's gifts include prophecy ('propheteian') and teaching ('didaskon'), separate gifts/ministry.

In 1 Cor.12:28 Paul says that 'In the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets ('prophetai'), third teachers ('didaskaloi').

Similarly, in 1 Cor. 14:6 Paul distinguishes between a person who brings a prophecy ('propheteia') and someone who brings a teaching ('didache').

And in Eph. 4: 11 Paul is keen to point out again that Christ's gifts to the church include prophets ('prophetas') separate from pastors and teachers ('didaskalous').

All of the gifts have the same function i.e. to build up the body of Christ, moving everyone towards maturity in him, but prophecy and teaching are separate gifts.

Notice too how Paul says we are to earnestly desire all of the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1). Not only is this gift able to greatly build up and encourage believers, but its exercise can convict unbelievers of God's reality and presence (1 Cor. 14:24&25).

Personally, I think it is unhelpful to distinguish between those who have a **gift** of prophecy and those who exercise a **ministry** of prophecy. There may indeed be a difference in the frequency of use of prophecy and/or even the weight of the prophecies brought, but prophecy is prophecy.

Similarly, I don't think it is right to distinguish in the Old Testament between the 'major' and the 'minor' prophets, as though some of them have more import than others. Better to call them 'longer' and 'shorter' prophets ~ all equal in worth and validity even if not in length.

Another reason why I think the gift of prophecy is overlooked is because: -

2. People believe, “There can be no more prophecy today in the way prophecy was used in Old Testament times. God speaks and reveals Himself today in different ways.”

There is some truth in this. The writer to the Hebrews begins by saying, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....” (1:1&2).

So Jesus, the word made flesh, is supremely the one, in these last days, through whom God has spoken. We are to listen to him. In Christ’s appearance and glory, Peter says, ‘We have the word of the prophets made more certain’ (2 Pet. 1:19). But this truth doesn’t, and shouldn’t, cancel out the importance of the prophetic word for today.

All through the New Testament we see the gift in operation or referred to. In fact it is ‘in the last days’, in which we now live, that Peter explains and expects that ‘your sons and daughters will prophesy’ as the Holy Spirit is poured out in fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:16-18). It sounds, from what Joel and Peter are saying, that prophesy should be one of the more liberal gifts scattered around today, not something which was going to wither away now that Christ had come.

When Paul was in Ephesus, 12 men prophesied as the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:6&7). On another occasion, when some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, Agabus foretold that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world – Acts 11:27&28. Just imagine how much easier it might have been if we had had a ‘pandemic prophet’ today who could have told us about the impending Covid-19 virus. We could have been much better prepared. But who would have spoken, and who would have listened?

Philip, one of the magnificent seven appointed as a foodbank coordinator, had 4 unmarried daughters who all had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:8) and Agabus pops up again with a dramatic prophecy using Paul’s belt (Acts 21:10&11).

Of course, no one’s prophetic words today are going to be incorporated into the canon of scripture as were the words of the foundational prophets of old, so in that sense prophecy has ended, but to dismiss, on that account, the reality and necessity of prophecy today would, in my view, be a grave error. It could even be a sign that the Holy Spirit is being quenched and his flames doused (1 Thess. 5:19&20).

3. Confusion as to Who is a Prophet.

I have heard people say that Sir David Attenborough is a prophet for today, even Greta Thunberg, as they draw attention to the plight of the natural world in which we live.

Although it is true that God can speak through anyone, - those who are not his people (Cyrus), those who are not sympathetic to Christ (Caiaphas, who came out with a prophetic utterance), even animals (Balaam's ass) - true prophets, it seems to me, will always be calling people back to God and speaking in His Name ~ something which neither Sir David nor Greta ever claim or mention.

Rather, they advocate that salvation is in our own hands.

So although I think we may want to listen to what they say, - and it is possible that God could speak through them - I would not classify them as prophets in the Biblical sense (and I often wonder how big is the carbon footprint of Sir David and his entourage).

4. A Fear of False Prophecy.

This can be a powerful hindrance to the exercise of the gift of prophecy or any other gift for that matter.

But the abuse, or misuse of prophecy is never a valid or sufficient reason for its disuse. The false should never be allowed to eclipse the genuine. No one stops using £5 notes because there are some forgeries around! But all prophecy should be tested/proved to make sure it is the real thing (1 Thess.5:21).

Jesus warns us that prophesying in his name is no guarantee of authenticity, rather we must look and wait to see what kind of fruit is being produced by the prophet and their words. False prophets have the ability to present as innocent and gentle sheep whilst inwardly being ferocious wolves. (Mt. 7:15-23)

All of the Biblical writers assume the presence of the false among the genuine, so discernment is needed.

Every time I write a letter and sign off 'Yours sincerely', I am reminded of the marble statues that were sold in Roman times. The word 'sincerely' comes from two Latin words meaning 'without wax' ('sine' = without, 'cera' = wax). Unscrupulous sellers of poor quality, white marble statues would fill all the cracks and imperfections in their statues with white wax which you couldn't see until you got them home, the sun came out, and the wax ran out!

So if you wanted the genuine article you went to a store where they advertised their statues as being 'sine cera', 'without wax'.

It is the same with prophecy; there is the real and the artificial, the genuine and the false.

Another reason why there seems to be a shortage of prophets today is: -

5. Because it is a Costly Gift/Ministry to Have and Exercise.

This depends of course on the nature of the prophetic word that the prophet is bringing. If it is purely a word of encouragement, then that is relatively straight forward. But if it is a word of warning or rebuke, then that can be more challenging to deliver.

OT prophets were often mocked and rarely heeded. Many of them were told to go and prophesy elsewhere, such was the disquiet they caused! Many were killed. Being a prophet then, as now, requires much faith and courage.

The problem with prophets is that they can unsettle our preconceptions and disturb our complacency. They are not easy to live with. They tend to deal in specifics rather than generalities. Like John the Baptist, who kept on and on at Herod because of his illicit relationship with his brother Philip's wife.

They are often lonely, isolated characters who sometimes wonder if the price they pay is worth it. Does what they say or do make any real difference? Again, John the Baptist was like this as he languished in prison before being decapitated.

Sometimes prophets emerge from within the organised religion of the day. For example, Ezekiel was a priest – though with no outward priestly duties to perform in exile in Babylon – and Jeremiah was both from a priestly family and a priestly city, Anathoth.

Conversely, Amos had neither a priestly background nor a prophetic one. He was minding his own business as a shepherd and tender of sycamore fig trees when, out of the blue, God called him to prophesy.

Are you open to such a possibility yourself?

But in general, prophets have to free themselves from the shackles of organised religion, from political parties, from the prevailing winds of the media and all the other power brokers and opinion formers of the age. Alas, prophets are always going to be cutting against the grain and sailing against the prevailing winds.

Yet they find it difficult to keep quiet as the word of God builds up like a pressure cooker within them. Then they just have to speak - See Jer. 20:9.

Some Biblical prophets were more powerful in word e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, while others were more powerful in miraculous deeds e.g. Elijah, Elisha. But they all had to get used to the fact that they had no power whatsoever in a political sense. That power always rested with the many and various kings, most of whom were dead set against the prophets.

This reality can be another frustration that prophets have to deal with. Yet another is the realisation that people mostly don't want to hear what they say.

But whilst prophets are valiant for truth, the truth they bring must always be accompanied by love, longing, and also offer hope. Jeremiah's 'Book of Tears' (my preferred name for Lamentations) is a prime example.

The words that prophets bring are often related to their life experiences and formed by them; God shapes their lives and turns them into vessels who will carry the specific messages he wants them to bear and deliver.

All prophets are different, but have this in common: they tend to 'see the sunset before most people have seen the dawn.'

So, having looked at some of the reasons why prophecy has largely (but not entirely) fallen into disuse today, it's time now to turn theory into practice.

It is my hope and prayer that more people will begin to earnestly desire and exercise the gift of prophecy and, if I may say so, especially more women who are willing to follow the Biblical precedent of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna and Philip's 4 daughters.

I remember, on one occasion, receiving a prophecy from a prophetess which was enormously encouraging. I had never met this woman before, but she said she had a word for someone present for whom two cities in the north were significant (this took place in the south).

She said the two cities were Carlisle and Hull. Well, I was born and bred in Carlisle, but Hull had never had any significance for me whatsoever until a few days before she brought the prophecy.

I had just received an invitation to lead a Day Course in Hull and, never having been there before (or since), I had just been looking on the map to see where it was and what was the best way to get there!

The Virus Vision.



But I want, finally, to share with you something I 'saw' when Covid-19 first landed in the UK at the end of January 2020. I have obviously sat on this for months but it has never gone away so I share it now.

It was a picture of an ant hill, about 5 feet high, and a large rock smashed into it. It killed some of the ants, but the others, the teeming majority, went about feverishly re-building the ant hill as it had been before.

And then I saw that another rock, a larger one, was being prepared.

As I asked the Lord about this, I believe he pointed out 10 areas of concern that he has about the life and practice of His people and the church in Britain today. Here they are:

- 1) The way we have coupled spirituality with individualism rather than community.
- 2) The way we have disengaged from the reality of death.

- 3) The way we have served mammon rather than God.
- 4) The way we have sought power and status rather than service.
- 5) The way we have idolised science and technology and put our hope in them.
- 6) The way we have neglected silence and solitude and have substituted 'noise'.
- 7) The way we have sought entertainment rather than true worship.
- 8) The way we have substituted activity for stillness.
- 9) The way we have neglected the poor.
- 10) The way we have plundered and polluted the environment instead of caring for the earth responsibly.

I hope that those of you who read this will 'weigh' it and consider what you may wish to do with it in regard to how far it is disseminated/discussed and what changes need to be made in the way our churches operate.

I don't think that in these 10 areas of church life things have been as bad as they could be, but in none of them have they been as good as they could be, or as God requires them to be.

There is no doubt in my mind that God is giving us time to address these issues and that with regard to the virus, God only allows what He can use. So there are good things that have and will emerge from the pandemic, and we also need to pay attention to what God is showing us and saying to us.

Many people are reminding us that 'God is with us', and I'm sure He is, but we also need to look carefully at, reflect on and appraise what brought us to this state of affairs.

It seems to me to be a time of winnowing, sifting the wheat from the chaff. We need to be willing to let the chaff blow away in the wind and retain the wheat.

What we don't want to do is to return to the old abnormal.

I read this quote recently from a guy called Henry David Thoreau (LICC Word for the Week – 28/9/20) and you will realise why it jumped out at me. He wrote: "It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: 'What are you busy about?'"

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