



Sermon: - 28th January 2018

“The words of the Prophet are written on the subway wall ...”

Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20; Mark 1: 21 – 28

I don't know about you, but Deuteronomy isn't one of my favourite books in the bible. It's hard to read. It's mainly just three very long sermons from Moses delivered just before they enter the promised land, admonishing the people of Israel, reminding them of the journey through the wilderness, and telling them to obey God. Much of it is God's regulations for living, regulations which will enable the Israelites to live peaceful, fruitful, and healthy lives. In the paragraph before the one we read morning, the Israelites are warned against sacrificing their son or daughter in the fire, practising divination or sorcery, interpreting omens, engaging in witchcraft, casting spells, or becoming a medium or spiritist, or consulting the dead. Instead, in this new land, the Lord will raise up prophets who will speak his word to the people.

Before we go any further I think it may be helpful to ask, what exactly is a prophet? We tend to think of prophets as people who foretell the future. Usually, it's a painful or difficult future, as in "prophet of doom!" Perhaps we get this idea because of stories like Jonah and the whale, where Jonah did indeed bring a message of doom to the people. Although, the promised apocalypse didn't in fact come about, because the people turned back to God. However, if we look closely at the biblical model there is much more that can be said about prophets than just that they foretell a painful future.

Biblical Prophets tended to be a particular kind of person. In the old Testament, prophets were people who were without consequence. They were not from the ruling classes, the judges, nor were they from the priestly classes. They were farmers, they were vinedressers, they came from among the ordinary people. What set them apart from those ordinary people was the fact that the spirit of God had fallen upon them and with the spirit inspiring their words they spoke with authority.

The people of Israel, having wandered for 40 years in the Desert, and having seen the great wonders that God performed through Moses, were frightened. They wanted a more ordinary sort

of mediator between them and God and so they said, “let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire any more, or we will die”. God had pity on them and promised, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.”

And then in the gospel reading we see Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, in a fulfilment of God’s promise to raise up a prophet from among them. Jesus teaches the people, and he teaches them with authority, yet he is not one of the ruling classes, he is not from the priestly classes, he is not a member of the Sanhedrin. Still he speaks with power and people listen to what he says. He speaks as one who knows the truth.

And in this we see the nature of a true prophet. A true prophet is a gift from God and will speak God’s words, which are always true, whether they hold good news or bad. Perhaps the title “prophet of doom” is not always so undeserved! But a true prophet will always speak God’s word, even when it is unpopular. He, or she, will not bring false messages, or speak in the name of other gods. However, a prophet is not so much foretelling the future as simply giving people a message from God. The prophets in the Old Testament were sent to bring people back to God when they had drifted away. Jesus, in the New Testament, also came to bring people back to God when they had drifted away. A true prophet speaks with authority and is a leader.

This raises a question for me, are there still people who speak God’s truth? Are there people who tell the truth, regardless of how unpopular it is, or how much it upsets others. And by others, I think we mean not only society in general, but also, specifically, our leaders, local, national and religious leaders.

Once upon a time we might have thought it was the role of our religious leaders to be prophets. It was their job to take God’s word to those in power, the government, and hold them to account. It was the job of our church leaders to stand up for the poor and call out the government on decisions that disadvantaged the poor and favoured the rich. Nowadays, however, the church has less power to be heard by governments. Religious leaders can still speak, but they speak with less authority. Society no longer wants to hear the truth they speak. So where are the prophets today?

I’m sure many of you, if not most of you, recognise the title of this sermon. It is of course a line from that very famous song by Paul Simon, Sounds of Silence. I could call him a prophet; indeed, I think many of our artists, musicians, poets, actors and comedians are prophets. They are often the ones who call out the government on their policies. But they the only prophets? Simon suggests that the words of the prophets are written on the subway wall. I had a look at some graffiti from

public places. Let's take a minute or two, to consider these statements, and think about whether they can be identified as prophecy? The acid test is, do they speak the truth? Do they shine a light on the darkness in society? Do they give us an insight into how God views our world today?

Graffiti

Some people are so poor, all they have is money.

I see humans, but no humanity.

Listen to the voiceless.

Question everything! Why?

We buy stuff we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't like.

You are valid!

Vote for nobody!

Resistance... because if we fight might lose but if we don't fight we've already lost

I wish I could fill up this wall, but I'll be gone soon

Help!

These were all written by ordinary people. But I think there is a sense in which they are prophecy. They speak directly to many of the ills in our society today.

Never has the world been so wealthy, and never have so many lived in dire poverty.

Never has the world had so much in the way of medical intervention yet never has there been so much sickness and ill-health, physical and mental.

Never has the world had the capacity to produce so much food, and never have so many lived with starvation.

Never has the world had the capacity to have so much leisure time, yet never have so many suffered stress.

Never has the world understood so much about crime and the causes of crime, yet never has there been so much crime.

Where are the prophets? Where are the people who will hold the government to account on their election promises? Where are the people who will tell the truth about what is happening in our society where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Where are the prophets?

Jesus was a prophet. Always, always he made sure that the least of his followers – the blind, the weak, the poor, the despised women and the neglected children – were given equal status with those who had the power and who were respected as religious authorities. He made sure that they knew that God loved them, and that God had no patience with hypocrisy and self-righteousness. That was his authority; the authority of the true prophet. He spoke and lived and acted in the name of his Father, who sent him to the world.

Where are the prophets today? Last week, I said you were all disciples. This week I tell you, you are all prophets! When you stand up for truth, you are a Prophet. When you stand up for righteousness, or mercy, or justice, you are a Prophet. When you take action against oppression, you are a Prophet. What does that mean? It can be very simple. If you help out at the food bank, if you give to charity, if you write to your MP, if you buy the big issue, you are a Prophet. If you speak words of love instead of hate, if you show acceptance instead of prejudice, if you call out our leaders when they fail to act on behalf of the voiceless, you are a Prophet. Wherever and whenever you show the values of the kingdom and not of the world, you are a prophet.

If I was to give you an aerosol can and send you out to nearest subway, what would you say? What comments would you have to make on our society today? How would you speak the truth into our situation? As a prophet, what truth would you tell? We are still in the season of Epiphany. The season when the light shines in the darkness. What light will we, as faithful prophets of God, bring into the darkness?