

Epiphany IV (C)
Jeremiah 1.4-10/I Corinthians 13.1-13/Luke 4.21-30
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
28 January 2007

“THE GOODLY FELLOWSHIP OF THE PROPHETS”

~Paul H. Friesen~

“The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls.” You may have enough grey hairs to have heard this about the time it was first sung. Simon and Garfunkel were thinking of hard truths uttered by marginal people in unlikely places.¹ There is some insight and biblical inspiration in this understanding of who prophets are and what prophecy is.

But we also know that at times it has been pathetically easy to be ‘prophetically hip’—to be prophetically fashionable. It has been too easy to gain praise for simply criticizing those who hold positions of responsibility in society and too easy to aim at upsetting social institutions, simply because they exist. It is even possible to be prophetically ‘branded’ these days—to wear the right clothes and drink the right drinks and say the right prophetic things without thinking prophetic things or living prophetic lives.

But prophecy has a far greater problem today. Prophecy can be quite shallow. That is, it can mean ‘trend spotting’ in consumer spending or the prediction of the behaviour of political parties. And prophecy can be misleading and distracting. It can mean reading the Newspaper in the hope of trying to match up this or that terrible story with a biblical verse here or there in our ancient Scriptures. But prophecy isn’t related to insider knowledge or educated guessing. Prophets and prophecy are absorbed with much bigger things.

Our Scriptures praise prophets and prophecy from beginning to end. Just this fall, in the book of *Hebrews*, in the great chapter on faith, ‘Samuel and the prophets’ were honoured amongst the great saints.² In the ancient hymn of the early church, the *Te Deum*, we sing to God: ‘The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise you.’ And in the canticle taken from the gospel of *Luke*, called the *Benedictus*, we sing out that God has spoken ‘by the mouth of the holy prophets who have been since the world began.’³

We have heard the story of the call of Jeremiah to the life and work of a prophet. It is no wonder he resisted, for he was sure to have heard the stories of Elijah and Elisha and what was called ‘the school (or company) of the prophets.’ It was

¹ ‘The Sound of Silence’ (1964) in *Sounds of Silence* (1966).

² *Hebrews 11.32* Biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

³ I have adapted these quotations from *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.8-9.

not a career to which one aspired. In fact many of the stories in the Scriptures about the prophets are about those who resisted the call or even fled the country, like Jonah, when called up for service. And many other stories in circulation were about the strange things prophets were compelled to do, to communicate God's word, and the difficult or ugly or even treasonous things a prophet was obligated to say, to convey God's message.

In fact there were 'false prophets', prophets on the undeclared pay roll of powerful politicians who undercut God's prophets. Among the stories is the one about Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah—the days we heard about last Sunday. Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the city was hindered, he said, by 'the prophetess Nodiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make [him] afraid.'⁴ The mere name 'prophet' was never enough.

The story of Jeremiah's call to the life of a prophet tells us at least two things.

First, prophets were not called because of particular qualifications or characteristics, but by God's voice and God's choice. *Second*, prophets were not called to support causes, no matter how righteous, but to speak the truth, no matter how bitter.

First: the truth is that the 'glorious company of the apostles' was a motley crew, that might easily include you or me. We can only stand back and admire God's creativeness as we acknowledge who are called prophets or prophetesses in Scripture. Moses was the pampered son of a despised minority in a powerful kingdom. The great scandal that forced him into a serious career slide left him almost forgotten by his own clan when he returned at the age of eighty, called by God to confront the Pharaoh.⁵ Jeremiah had a day job already—he had already taken up the family business, as it were. He was a priest, but young, pushing twenty perhaps.⁶

On the other hand, the prophetess Miriam, Moses' older spinster sister, was an artist who led the liturgical song and dance to declare God's deliverance, the liberation of her people from slavery.⁷ The prophetess Anna was a widow in her eighties when she welcomed the eight-day old baby Jesus in the temple.⁸ On the other hand, Deborah the prophetess was married to a man about whom we know nothing except his name (Lapidoth): yet she was the highest judicial and political official of her day, and her support was begged by the chief military general of the country.⁹

⁴ *Nehemiah* 6.14

⁵ This part of the story is told in *Exodus* 3.1-4.20.

⁶ *Jeremiah* 1.1; 1.6-7.

⁷ *Exodus* 15.19-22.

⁸ *Luke* 2.36-38.

⁹ *Judges* 4.1-5.31.

Likewise, we know nothing about the husband of the prophetess Huldah save his name. In fact, all we know about Huldah is that she was married into the family of the Keeper of the Royal Wardrobe. And that she seemed to be the only prophet around in the early days of the boy-king Josiah.

But we do know that she was the only one who could speak the terrifying and comforting message that Josiah had to hear.¹⁰

There are many more stories—Amos worked as a shepherd. Hosea's troubled marriage was a sign of the troubled relationship between God and God's people. Ezekiel was an exile given to very strange visions. This just names a few—the prophets had no set qualifications and no consistent characteristics. But they all had what Jeremiah had. They knew they were God's choice because they heard God's voice.

Oh, they often objected to being chosen. Even Jesus must have felt this in today's Gospel when he said, 'no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.' If I can paraphrase the words from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the bitter, ironic words: Why me God, why should I be so lucky to have your attention, to be your choice? Jeremiah objected that he was too young, but there is no end to objections—Moses tried quite a few of them, all about, well, how he wasn't really good with words, and that nobody would listen to him.

But in the end Jeremiah accepted that he was chosen, that God knew him before his birth, and set him apart to speak God's truth, and appointed him to prophecy certain things in particular times and in particular places. And Jeremiah accepted God's word that the prophecy wasn't his own clever construction, but simply the truth. And Jeremiah accepted the fact that it wasn't his holiness that set him apart but God's choice, for God's reasons.

God calls prophets, and prophets are made by their faithful response, and by nothing else—not by education or by leadership qualities or by public respect. It is not that these things don't matter, but that these things don't make a prophet. God said to Jeremiah, 'I knew you, I consecrated you, I appointed you.' In fact God says this to all of us. When we gather around the table to share his goodness, his life, his body and blood, God calls us. God know our strengths and our weaknesses. God knows that we sometimes accept and sometimes reject divine grace. God calls us to speak the truth as prophets, regardless. And, regardless, God gives us particular truths to speak at particular in times in particular places. With bread in our hands and wine on our lips God says to us: I have known you from the beginning. I have set you apart to do what no one else can do and say what no one else can say at the right moment. God calls us to be prophets in the prophetic moment.

¹⁰ *II Kings* 22.14-20.

If we believe that prophets were not called because of particular qualifications or characteristics, but by God's voice and God's choice, a big question remains. What are we to say?

The story of Jeremiah helps us again. *Prophets are not called to support causes, no matter how righteous, but to speak the truth, no matter how bitter.*

What does the Apostle Paul say? 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but do not have love, I gain nothing.' And neither does anyone else within listening range.

God did not appoint Jeremiah to support the political cause of his nation, but to speak the truth, as it was put to him, 'to nations and kingdoms'. There was to be no multi-tasking, no 'Word of God' on the one hand, and on the other hand useful networking for the glory of God's temple or Israel's king. Jeremiah was to speak the truth to all to whom he was sent, at home or in the home of his neighbour or his nation's king or his nation's enemy.

And it is indeed hard to speak the truth at home if the truth seems to put us at a disadvantage in relation to those secular folk out there, or those wicked people over there. But the prophetic truth is not concerned with this or that cause, no matter how righteous. It does matter that the interests of church and state are attended to, but not in the prophetic moment at the prophetic time. What is distressing in the public sphere is to see God's prophecy too neatly fit with the agenda of a particular political party, or to see God's prophecy too nicely defend the foreign policy of a particular nation.

But the sound of hollow, clanging prophecy, empty of love, clangs closer to home, in the life of each Christian. To say the truth might be bitter is not to say that the prophet has hatred rather than love. Because true love is aimed at all, and hopes for a response to God's divine invitation, hopes for reform and change. Jeremiah, he was told, was to carry the word that would pluck up and pull down, but a divine word that would also dig in and plant and build up.

The prophet responds to God's call and is faithful to God's word. She does not confuse God's call with her qualifications, and he does not use God's word for any cause but the truth. Jeremiah was the prophet for his day; we are appointed for this afternoon, for this week.

Thanks be to God, who loves us so, that he gives us only the truth. Praise God that the prophetic word is granted us. Pray God that we will put all our arts at God's disposal in this great commission to speak the right word at the right time. In the end 'the truth will out' as they say. It should be us speaking it in love, and not in words that ring hollow. And it can be us, if we receive the divine word with God's bread and wine this morning.