

Feast of St. John the Baptist
Isaiah 40.1-11/*Acts* 13.13-26/*Luke* 1.57-80
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
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~Paul H. Friesen~

You are probably familiar with several lines of books with titles like 'Email for Dummies' or 'The Idiot's Guide to Basic Plumbing'. There are books like this on almost every topic today, from Greek Philosophy to American Antiques. One can even find titles like these about the Christian Scriptures. Several years ago in fact, I had hoped to write, with a friend, a witty book about Anglicanism with a similar 'no-frills cover'. I'll let you guess why I didn't go ahead!

These books all promise to explain something complicated in the fewest words possible and in language anyone can understand. So what would *Prophets and Prophecy for Dummies* look like if it were written?

Well, if anyone took on the project I would encourage him—I would encourage her—to begin with a glance at Baghdad's *National Theatre*, described recently in an article in the *Washington Post*.¹ Because good theatre is often prophetic, and actors are often prophets—especially actors and theatres that have fallen on hard times.

The *National Theatre* in Iraq was once renowned for things it cannot now possess, for obvious reasons. Iraq is a country in ruins. The Theatre is impoverished. The cast of the most recent production called 'Intensive Care Unit' serves no political master. The actors are Sunni Moslem, and Shia Moslem, and Christian (presumably Eastern Orthodox, the Christian community that has been in the country for 1700 years).

The actors aren't paid—the government grant can't even cover cab fare to and from the theatre for the few actors. And they need to travel this way. For stage props, a collection is gathered from the pillaged streets; for costumes, the actors' small closets at home offer the only wardrobe.

Everyone coming into the theatre is frisked for weapons—and only the actors, and their small audience (other actors and friends of the performers enter. Performances can only be held in the daylight hours. It is dangerous work. Fourteen actors have been killed since the Americans invaded the country and deposed its dictatorial President. Two actors quit during performances for the current production.

¹ Ernesto Londono's 'Baghdad's War Theatre' appeared in *The Guardian Weekly* (06.01.07), p.31.

So what is the point of it all for the theatre? Simply this: the truth is spoken regardless of the cost. As one woman, one of the actors put it: 'Our play is a miniature version of reality.' Reality. Not the political spin of the invaders. Not the hatred of the dozens of militias. Reality—the truth about humans and their society. Few perhaps want to hear it in Baghdad, but they will hear it if they enter the theatre. How times have changed from the days before the invasion when comedies were staged in Baghdad to distract folks, and propaganda plays reinforced the version of truth distorted by a dictator's government. The truth, now.

I think John the Baptist would have understood Baghdad's *National Theatre*, for after all he was called by Jesus the greatest of the prophets. And today we keep the ancient date which celebrates his birth—three months after the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, six months before Jesus' birth at Christmas.

So what would the *Idiot's Guide to John the Baptist* look like?

The old *Prayer Book* collect (i.e. the prayer for today) gives us all we need to know in one long sentence. It goes this way:

'Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance; Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching, and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake...'²

'To prepare the way of [Jesus] our Saviour, and to 'constantly speak the truth'—this is the biography of John the Baptist in a nutshell.

But so that we don't stand at a distance and admire this great prophet from afar, and so that we don't regret we can never be like him, and so that we don't simply get on with our life, discouraged and 'un-prophetic', we are told about John's life.

And John's life reflected the life of all prophets.

The ancient Hebrew prophets were a hard-luck bunch. Usually they were asked to speak the truth in tough moments, at a significant cost to their lives. They were asked to confront powerful people about the wrong they did to weaker people—or people caught at a weak point. They often spoke out when their country was in a hard decade or a hard century. Some prophets were young, or were women, and this added to their difficulties. Others were in troubled marriages, or in broken families.

And the truth came to the prophets in hard ways. Some were overcome by strange visions that predicted the opposite of what the King and his nobles

² *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.278.

predicted. And the truth was delivered in awkward moments by the prophets, or in awkward ways—theatre that no one wanted.

Some prophets told stories or jokes with sarcastic endings or dangerous punch lines. Other prophets felt compelled by God to play-act the truth with their bodies, or their lives. The Bible describes it to us. We know that many of them objected to becoming Prophets, or resisted delivering particular pieces of prophecy.

John the Baptist was a special child, born to his parents in old age. But he was not a 'golden-by' in a prosperous and powerful nation. He was born into an occupied country—Israel had been invaded by the Roman Army which did so in the name of extending 'peace' and 'stabilizing the region'. His father was a priest, and so should John have been but, he never was.

His father had a vision before John's birth—it had struck him dumb, rendered him, literally, speechless. His father had insisted in writing on the name John—a Greek name in the language of the Roman invaders, not a family name. John had gone off like a hermit, as a young adult, into the wilds of the countryside. He refused alcohol and haircuts and wasn't good in delicate social situations. He gathered disciples in spite of his best efforts not to, but then saw them go over to follow Jesus, his cousin, as John's own star began to fade. His last piece of prophecy about politics had landed him in jail.

He finally sent messengers to Jesus when his spirit was broken. In the words of the Gospel: 'When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another".' John's sharp prophetic tongue kept going, even though John had lost hope.

And so Jesus said to John's disciples: 'Go tell John what you hear and see...Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'³ John had begun to doubt if Jesus was the Son of God, bringing with him the Kingdom of God. And Jesus had gently rebuked him. It didn't make Jesus less the Saviour or John less a prophet.

John had revived the Hebrew prophecy of old. In his few months of fame had come he spoke hard, truthful words to the crowds, to the religious leaders, and to Roman soldiers. And he had done so to 'prepare the way of the Lord.' This is what John is remembered for by the early church. We heard it this morning in the words of a sermon by St. Paul in Antioch-Pisidia, recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*: 'As John was finishing his work, [John] said, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me.'

³ *Matthew* 11.2-6. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

This had been the task of the ancient prophets, as we also heard, in the prophecy of Isaiah: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

And this was the moment of prophecy uttered by John's father, Zechariah the Prophet, in the Gospel. 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people.'

To 'prepare the way of the Lord' and 'to constantly speak the truth'—this is the story of John the Baptist. This is the two-point structure of the life of a prophet, or of any guide book to the prophets. But what does it have to do with us?

Certainly, we shouldn't feel that our life is too troubled, or too normal for us to be prophetic.

St. Paul described it this way to the church in the city of Corinth: 'We have this treasure in clay jars'.⁴ All lives have shape and meaning, like any vessel. And jars with cracks only show off the treasure within—this was the implication of the Apostle's description. We are all asked to speak the truth and prepare the way of the Lord.

Perhaps this is why the canticle—the biblical poetry—meant to be said every day at Morning Prayer in the traditional Anglican rite, has priests, and people, repeat: 'Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people.'

Prophecy is not all about us, though we are asked to be prophets. We are meant to leave providence in God's hands, but to prepare the way of God. This has been done and can be done in dozens of ways. The cracked, clay vessels of our lives give us the clue. Our weaknesses, our broken society, help us point to 'salvation'. To know this, and to write it, and act it out, and to paint it, and to talk about it, is to 'prepare the way of the Lord.'

And what is 'salvation'? It is the whole truth! The first truth told about the harm, the sin done to us, and the harm or sin we do to others. And it is the final truth, the truth that swallows up the first, the truth that in Jesus Christ forgiveness, healing, restoration has come and is coming. This is the news of salvation. And it must be declared in every way we can—with imagination and compassion.

This is the short book on the church, which will remain the church if it is prophetic like John the Baptist; if the church doesn't stop taking a hard look at itself and the world, if it doesn't stop declaring salvation in its worship and in its daily life.

⁴ *II Corinthians* 4.7.

There is no more powerful and concise way to do this than in the Eucharist, in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Table, what we call the Sacrament. Thus the church has done from the beginning and will do as long as it remains the church. The bread and wine, Christ's body and blood, Christ's life (body and soul), declares to our head, and heart, and our bodies the truth—the truth about our broken failures, and the truth of the great hope of salvation. 'The kingdom of God is at hand'—this is what both John the Baptist and Jesus said. This is what we say this morning.

Amen.