

Prophets for our time

This morning's Gospel was very short, a mere 3 verses, one of the shortest set for any Sunday in the year. It is bereft of its context, and on its own perhaps somewhat puzzling. It has assumed we heard and remembered the Gospel readings of the last two Sundays, the preceding paragraphs of chapter 10. But last week we marked Windrush Sunday and changed the gospel reading, and 2 weeks ago is a long time to remember! So a brief word on the wider context of today's three verses. It is a key point in Matthew's gospel as Jesus' ministry expands in scope and begins to be shared more actively with his disciples. So in the preceding paragraphs Matthew has introduced us to the twelve disciples by name and then recorded Jesus commissioning them, sending them out in mission: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons".

He warns them that whilst their words and ministry will be welcomed by some, they could not always expect an easy time or a good response. The response they would sometimes meet would be one that was familiar to the Old Testament prophets, and the discourse leads, in today's reading, to the reference to prophets. The compilers of the lectionary latched on to that reference and gave us our first reading from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. So looking at those readings and noting that the noun prophet or verb prophesy appear over a dozen times there seemed to be an invitation being presented to us to reflect today a little on the nature of the prophet and the prophetic ministry –not just historically, not just in relation to Jesus' disciples, but also in our own time.

In common usage to prophesy is generally understood as meaning to foretell some future event, often a disaster. That understanding is to be found in the Bible too, but it develops through the centuries of the OT to far more commonly emphasise the key role of the prophet as being to speak a word from God – sometimes even to enact a word from God. That might be a word about the future but far more often a forthright word to God's people about the present, challenging them about their conduct and behaviour. In the words of a rather clichéd teaching aid, prophecy, the role of the prophet, is more about forthtelling than foretelling. But having said that, there's an element in forthtelling that points to the future – for the prophet often has the vision to see and to communicate to his hearers what the consequences will be if they follow his words, or if they ignore them.

The role of the prophet is not a comfortable role and very often the task of the Christian prophet today is to hear a challenging word from God and then to speak and act prophetically. If the prophet is heard, sometimes the wider church will then respond and take on that prophetic voice, to speak truth to power, influencing the wider community. In the 18th and 19th centuries, at the time Christ Church was first built, it took the prophetic action of Christians like William Wilberforce and his colleagues in the Clapham Sect to challenge the long accepted practice of slavery and the slave trade, to shed new light on Biblical teaching in the face not just of vested economic interests but also the opposition of much of the bench of Bishops. No wonder we are hearing apologies from the Church of England and many other establishment bodies at this time, in the light of the Black Lives Matter

campaign, as the penny finally seems to drop.

It was Christians speaking and acting prophetically in the 19th century who were in the vanguard of movements to change attitudes and prevent exploitation of children and others in the workplace, but as so often there was opposition.

It was Christians, often lone voices in the wilderness, who began the process of drawing attention to and campaigning for action to remedy the appalling conditions in which so many lived in our cities. Eventually the message began to be heard in the wider church and taken up by people like David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, and serious work began to be done. In 1985 the church report Faith in the City was published (and immediately denounced by the Thatcher government). In spite of that, or perhaps because of that, it became something of a watershed in terms of the ministry of the Church to the deprived areas of our cities and to the many poor and disadvantaged people who live there. It led to the creation of the charity, the Church Urban Fund, in 1987 which continues today, speaking and working to alleviate poverty and its causes. Our local charity Genesis works in similar areas and draws its inspiration from the same source.

The work of many Christian charities nowadays has a prophetic edge to it, illustrating different ways in which the prophetic ministry of the Church is exercised in our time and making the point that prophetic words need to find their focus in prophetic action. Some come to our attention month by month through the Christ Church charity of the month. We need to continue to support them and pray for them in their work.

It's a reminder, if we needed one, that prophetic words need to lead to prophetic actions. St Francis of Assisi is reputed to have said 'Preach the gospel at all times, use words if you must'. In reality the two are indivisible and both are, from time to time, at the heart of the prophetic ministry of the church. Words and action; action and words. Both are needed if we are to be faithful to the call to prepare the way of the Kingdom of God.

And so in closing some questions for us each to take away and reflect on. Where do we see the prophetic words and actions of the community here at Christ Church? Is it in our support of the needy? Is it in the support for the Windrush Community we celebrated last week? Where is it? Where should it be? How might we discern and develop the prophetic ministry of our church?

And what about ourselves? Are there times and occasions when as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to speak a prophetic word or engage in a prophetic action? How might that be discerned and encouraged? Might our prayers and reflection, might our silence before God, lead us to words and action that will result in our becoming part of what God is doing in our community.

Amen. So be it.