

Prophecy

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

James 3:1

These words are from the Apostle James. He is referring, of course those who teach in the Christian community - people like me. He could have said the same about prophets. The heart of prophecy is speaking from God, speaking on behalf of God, sometimes to warn sometimes to encourage. It is a presumptuous ministry, always inviting the response, 'Who do you think you are?'

Prophecy first became prominent in the time of the kings of Israel. They lived dangerous lives for they often had to rebuke kings when they misbehaved. So Nathan pointed out to King David, by a parable, that he had done wrong in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then arranging for the death of her husband. David repented and Nathan then assured him of God's forgiveness. Nathan survived.

Elijah survived, but only just, and at one point fled into the desert in fear of his life. Jeremiah survived but he was pilloried and thrown down a well.

In today's readings we hear of three prophets: Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus. Ezekiel is one of those prophets whose words are collected together in a single book named after him – and in Ezekiel's case a long book. He exercised his ministry about six hundred years before Jesus and warned the people of Israel that if they did not keep God's laws they would face destruction. The passage we heard today recounts Ezekiel's call to be a prophet and is in a sense the classic account of that ministry. It begins with a vision of God, and an experience of hearing God speak. It has to be this way. If a prophet is called to speak on behalf of God then he or she has to have a very clear sense of what it is God wants to say. He has to know God,

face to face if you like. And he, or she, has to be filled with God's Spirit. Ezekiel was.

Second he had to know what it was God called him to say. And God was quite clear that Ezekiel had to tell the people of Israel they were rebelling against God.

St Paul is not referred to explicitly as a prophet but there is no doubt that he spoke from God and did so very consciously. The passage we heard today comes from a much longer passage, which Paul writes with passion, emotion and great self-revelation. He had spent eighteen months in Corinth and built up the church there. It was a strategically important place to establish a church: it was a large port with a large hinterland and many people would have passed through Corinth and many people would have encountered the gospel. If Paul had lived in 21st century Britain he would have built up a church at Heathrow airport.

His method was to move on and leave the continued nurture of the church to local people. Usually this was a successful strategy but not entirely so in the case of Corinth. We have no direct accounts of what was going on. But we can read between the lines of Paul letters. If we notice what he railed against, we know what he perceived to be happening in Corinth. There was factionalism, with groups of Christians allying themselves with individual leaders; there was personal ambition; there was straightforward selfishness; and what Paul is particularly angry about here is that individual church leaders are bigging themselves up. Paul's response is to boast – but not of his strength but of his weakness

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 1 Corinthians 11:23-33

This is quite extraordinary. Why would a man boast of his weakness? This is by no means an isolated example. His boast of weakness at the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians is less exasperated, less emotional and contains a little more explanation:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

And it would seem that this is quite true, for in his second letter he quotes his critics:

"His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible."

2 Corinthians 10:10

He then goes on to acknowledge this:

I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge.

2 Corinthians 11:6

So in a sense he is making a virtue out of necessity. But the point is important. Whatever a prophet achieves is not through his or her own strength but through the power of God. In the passage we just heard Paul makes it clear that he, like Ezekiel we might say, has been commissioned through a kind of vision, which he describes as 'being caught up into the third heaven', into 'Paradise'. But he is clearly aware that this kind of vision can lead to a kind of spiritual pride: 'I am better than you because I have had mystic spiritual experience'. But he then links this with some kind of illness or disability, which he calls a thorn in the flesh. He does not say what it is: it has been speculated that it was epilepsy, sexual desire, malaria, blindness, migraine – but Paul never tells us. What matters to him is the interpretation: it is sent by God to prevent him being proud, arrogant, and

reliant on his own strength: 'when I am weak I am strong'. The argument is, at heart, very simple: he needs to rely on the strength of God to do God's work.

Jesus clearly believed the same. When he sent his disciples into the wider community he could have given them large bags full of supplies. He sent them with nothing but the clothes they stood up in. They had to rely on others for support. They had to rely on God.

Where are the prophets now? Where are the Christians speaking from God, speaking against the consensus? Where are the Christians speaking to those in power? Perhaps in South Africa where the Anglican church stood up against apartheid and then in favour of reconciliation, notably through Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Perhaps in South America where RC clergy have stood up for the poor against international business – and some, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, have died. Perhaps in this country where back in 1985 the CofE, through a report *Faith in the City*, drew attention to the poverty and disillusionment of those who lived in our inner cities.

But prophesying can be dangerous. It can lead to charges of hypocrisy. The Church of England would be living very dangerously if it pointed the finger at others over the matters of child sexual abuse. At the last meeting of the Diocesan Synod members agreed to urge the government and all political parties to work to remove inequality throughout the country. One member of Synod warned that if we ourselves were found to be paying our employees unacceptably low wages we would be revealed as hypocrites.

If we are to be prophetic we must make sure that we apply the words of God to ourselves before we apply them to others. As St James might have said:

Not many of you should become prophets, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who prophesy will be judged with greater strictness.

N Clews
8th July 2018
St Margaret only