

Readings:

Malachi 3: 1-4

Philippians 1: 3-11

Luke 3: 1-6

Where have all the prophets gone?

The second Sunday of Advent – just over two weeks to go until Christmas. Why does it always come so quickly? Maybe whenever it was it would catch us unprepared. Are we all last minuters? The season of Advent is about getting ready – ready for the coming of God among us. Not just at the first Christmas but also the promised return of Jesus – something we believe will happen, but unlike Christmas we've no idea when that will be, which is why we need to be prepared. One of the things we do in Advent is to have the Advent wreath and the candles to remind us of the history of God's people up to the time of Jesus' first coming – his birth in Bethlehem, when God in the person of Jesus came to live among his people.

Last week's candle represented the Patriarchs – the founding fathers of the Jewish nation. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Every Jewish person could trace their ancestry back through one of the twelve tribes to Jacob and through him to Abraham. That's something we in this country can't do – there are no patriarchs or founding fathers of the English, let alone the British people. In one way or another we are all immigrants.

This week we're thinking about the prophets – those people (not all men, let it be said) called by God to speak out his word – usually when things were going wrong – and remind the people how God wanted them to live, and the consequences of not following in his way. As you can imagine that set the prophets on a collision course with the powers that be and often led to them suffering or even being killed for their efforts. Jesus himself lamented over Jerusalem saying 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23:37). The parable which Jesus told about the wicked tenants of the vineyard¹ who killed all the messengers the owner sent and then killed the owner's son, illustrated his point that over the course of Jewish history God's messengers, the prophets, had all been rejected – and Jesus knew it would happen to him as well.

However, the message from God was not always one of doom and gloom. Once the catastrophe of the Exile had taken place and many people were taken off to live in exile in Babylon, their distress and suffering was not ignored by God and he promised through the prophet Isaiah that there would be a time of restoration and renewal. The people would come back to their homeland and the Temple would be rebuilt, and they would experience God's presence in a new and deeper way.

The quotation from Isaiah that we heard as part of our gospel reading comes from Isaiah ch. 40, and these verses are preceded by words of comfort to the people suffering in exile. 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.' (Isaiah 40:

¹ Matthew 21: 33-41

1-2). Despite all their shortcomings – their waywardness and sin – the people of the Jewish nation were forgiven and offered a new start with God. That forgiveness and promise came before their repentance – such is the love of God.

Who were the prophets? What did it take to become one? They were a mixed bunch. There was no particular qualification other than responding to the call of God – and that was often done with reluctance. Jeremiah protested that he was too young, Isaiah that he was too sinful. Called to preach repentance to Nineveh, Jonah immediately set sail in the opposite direction and tried to get as far away as possible. But as with the other prophets even Jonah could not resist God's call for ever.

Just as Jesus taught in parables the prophets sometimes used enacted parables to get the message across. Perhaps the most striking of these is shown in the life of Hosea whose wife deserted him and became a prostitute. God used this situation to get across the message that he had loved the people of Israel as dearly as a wife and yet they had deserted him. He told Hosea to buy back his wife from the man who was pimping her and restore her to his home – as a parallel to what God wanted to do with the Jewish nation. The word from God in Old Testament prophecy always follows this two-fold pattern – a renewed relationship with him and a determination to live as he required in terms of caring for the poor and needy and upholding justice.

In Jewish thought, chief amongst the prophets was Elijah. He held a special place in Jewish belief and his importance is reflected in his appearance alongside Moses at Jesus' transfiguration, Moses representing the Law and Elijah the prophets. The details of Elijah's life and in particular his death are sketchy. We read about him in the First Book of Kings, chapter 17 onwards, and the beginning of the Second Book. He is credited with a number of miracles including raising someone from the dead and a miraculous feeding, similar to the ones Jesus did, although not on such a grand scale. The important thing about Elijah was that he did not die a normal death, but we are told that he went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Belief in the resurrection was not part of Jewish thought at the time so the lack of a physical death meant to them that Elijah was alive with God.

Another prophet of significance is Isaiah whose words were quoted in our gospel reading. From Isaiah's writings came the idea of a Messiah figure who would rescue the Jewish nation from foreign oppression. In particular four passages known as the Servant Songs point to the coming of one who would suffer on behalf of the people but who would bring the people back to God and put right all that was wrong in the world. No time frame was set for the fulfilment of these prophecies and people were still waiting hopefully and expectantly by the time of Jesus, although there had been no further prophets after the time of Malachi some three hundred years before Jesus. Part of the beliefs about the Messiah was that his coming would be heralded by the return of Elijah to warn of his coming. And that brings us to our Gospel reading in which John the Baptist responds to God's call and becomes that Elijah figure warning the people that the promised one is about to appear. So he calls people to repentance – that is to turn their hearts and minds towards God so they can be ready to receive him. John's message of repentance is not about sin – it's the same as the prophets of old – turn back to God and live as he requires. The prophet Micah (Micah 6:8) tells us

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Do this and you will be ready to receive God when he comes. Whenever he comes. The message is the same today as it was then.

But what of prophecy today? Where are the prophets today? I believe there are many and there should be more. Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit which God longs to give us and use for the benefit of the church. God wants us to know what his will is and how we can best serve him. He wants us to give his message of love to all people and to help people understand what is wrong in life. The church – and here I mean the Church of England – is very poor about speaking out about what is wrong in our society when people do speak out they are often criticised, vilified even, by other Christians. Such is the lot of a prophet. The church is privileged to have a voice in parliament. It should use it more and more effectively. But that is not the only place for prophecy. We can all speak out by joining campaigns for various issues to do with justice and caring about those who need help and support. We can also speak out in our daily lives when we encounter bullying or discrimination, or anything else we feel is not in accordance with what we believe would be God's will.

It takes courage and probably a thick skin. But we don't act on our own. If we are being led by God in this he will give us the strength and the insight needed through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. So that means prayer and reflection on what God's will might be. But just as God needed and used the prophets of old so we are needed to make God's message of love for all people known in the world today. Is that a challenge you might respond to? Think about it – where might you be called to speak out for God?

To him be the glory. Amen.

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8th December 2018