

St Andrews on The Terrace Sun June 15 2018 Pentecost 8 Prophecy Poetry and Imagination

Readings for the Gathering: Hebrew Bible

Hosea 2: 16-20

"In that day," declares God, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.'"

¹⁷ I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. ¹⁸ In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. ¹⁹ I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. ²⁰ I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge me.

Gospel

A Prophet Without Honour

Mark 6: 1-6

⁶ Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?" ³ Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph,^[a] Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴ Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honour except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Contemporary reading

David Alton writing about Robert Kennedy

<https://davidalton.net/2011/08/09/to-see-a-newer-world-robert-kennedy/>

Kennedy's own passionate analysis was not silenced by his assassin. The civil rights he advocated are now commonplace; his antagonism, both towards Marxism and the social negligence which succoured it, holds good. Robert Kennedy's Catholic faith, his belief in human dignity and the common good animate the text [of his book *To Seek a Newer World*]. It is tempting to wonder whether, had he lived, if in another ten year he would have been forced to compromise that faith (as his younger brother Ted would do).... But, mercifully, in 1968 he was not required to make that tryst. The book takes its title from some stirringly beautiful lines penned by the Victorian poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem "Ulysses",

Come, my friends./ 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world..../ Though much is taken, much abides; and though/ We are not now that strength which in old days/ Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—/ One equal temper of heroic hearts,/ Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

By invoking Ulysses Kennedy perfectly catches the thought that every generation has to seek a newer world and that whatever calamities may befall us individually, or collectively, we should not allow them to incapacitate us; that we should be ready to take on impossible odds.

The dedication of the book is to "to my children and yours" and Kennedy uses the words of Albert Camus to remind us that although we may not be able to solve every injustice it is a poor excuse for failing to solve any of them:

"Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children. And if you don't help us, who else in the world can help us do this?"

During the 1968 campaign for the Presidency this sense of refusing to accept the inevitability of how things are was challenged by Kennedy again and again. In what became a defining remark he said: [quoting George Bernard Shaw] *"Some men see things as they are and say, 'Why'? I dream of things that never were and say, 'Why not'?"*

This idea of the active citizen taking on a rotten and decaying system of politics and seeking its renewal was based on a view of citizenship which was rooted in Kennedy's love of the ancient world and the purity of public service. He insisted that every claimed right had to be matched by a duty. In a speech to the University of San Francisco Law School he said:

"Since the days of Greece and Rome when the word 'citizen' was a title of honour, we have often seen more emphasis put on the rights of citizenship than on its responsibilities. And today, as never before

in the free world, responsibility is the greatest right of citizenship and service is the greatest of freedom's privileges."

They say don't they, that you remember where you were when significant events occur. I remember vividly the Saturday morning when as a pre-teen I heard that President John F Kennedy had been shot and killed in Dallas Texas. I don't remember where I was when I heard that his brother Robert f. Kennedy had suffered the same fate moments after his victory speech on winning the Californian primary. It was 50 years ago last month, 6th June 1968. If you are older than I am, you will have other shocking events you remember. If you are younger, you will have yet other events which equally are seared into your heart and mind. At an impressionable stage of life, the Robert Kennedy which David Alton describes in the contemporary reading was a modern day prophet for my idealistic soul. Finding out more about the Kennedy dynasty as I have grown older, my view now might not be as rosy coloured, but I remember the inspiring effect JFK and RFK had on my worldview. The description in the contemporary reading places Robert Kennedy in prophetic mode – his citing of George Bernard Shaw's words: *"Some [men] see things as they are and say, 'Why'? I dream of things that never were and say, 'Why not'?"* made me feel as a teenager that anything was possible; that we all needed to set our aspirations for the world a lot higher than they had been before.

Robert and John Kennedy have the advantage which Princess Diana also has in our memories. Someone cut down in their prime remains in our minds as that vital, energetic idealistic person, eternally young, eternally promising a better world; not carrying yet the full legacy of their mistakes and failures. As we say on Anzac Day "they will not grow old as we that are left grow old, age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn." So I am prepared to admit that to call Robert Kennedy a modern day prophet may be to overstate the case and succumb to my rosy spectacled teenager idealism. I note too now that I am older that he was American, not a home-grown New Zealand prophet. When I was a teenager, the heroes delivered to through popular culture tended to be from overseas. We hadn't yet as New Zealanders gained the confidence we now have to claim our own prophets and visionaries. Like Jesus, our New Zealand prophets for too long were without honour in their own country. Sometimes and even now recognition outside of NZ can be more easily gained than from within.

The image on the front of the order of service names prophets as those who carry the message. What is that message? That actual content of the prophetic message will vary from context to context. But a truly prophetic message has transcendent quality – it concerns issues which are over and above and beyond. A prophetic message looks past the ordinary, paints in bold brushstrokes the big picture, offers intuitive, imaginative and poetic challenges to us and our society when we might otherwise have developed a tunnel vision and a warped perspective.

The prophetic message can be narrowly viewed as foretelling the future and has been. Some of our advent narratives have been crowded with apparent foretelling of the birth of Jesus, sprinkled throughout the Hebrew scriptures – more often proof texting than accurate and legitimate prophecy. But looking more broadly, the prophetic message offers, out of the prophet's own imagination, a vision of how a world might be different in the future. It offers a view of life which has never been or which never was. The prophet confronts our laziness and ignorance; asking us "why not?"; asking why have we not acted or why can we not make the changes which the prophet sees as urgent and necessary and vital. Thinking of a prophet as the nation's conscience or the carrier of a vision of a different future rather than as a magic forecasting medium, who would you name as one of our New Zealand prophets? Which New Zealander have called us, or still calls us to account? Who names a different future as more desirable than where we are heading. Who is it who asks us here in Godzone "why not?". Or, you might think of a prophetic movement – like the Women's Suffrage Movement of 125 years ago which we celebrate this year. Pause for congregation to talk....

Take care of our children/ Take care of what they hear/ Take care of what they see/ Take care of what they feel/ For how the children grow/ So will be the shape of Aotearoa. . . ~ Dame Whina Cooper ~

Prophets are our topic today because we are leaping through great chunks of the Bible week by week this month - a reference to matriarchs and patriarchs within the books of the law at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, then reflecting on the wisdom literature through the story of Job last week. Moving from law to history to wisdom, the Hebrew Bible then finishes with a collection what are called major and minor prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah and his book Lamentations and Ezekiel are major prophets (along with Samuel Elijah and Elisha, earlier in the books of Samuel and Kings). Then come the minor prophets - Daniel, Hosea, Joel and Amos, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

After the rule of Solomon, the nation of Israel split into a northern and southern kingdom. The kings ruling the two kingdoms after David and Solomon were seldom good rulers. The two kingdoms were also constantly at threat from powerful empires. Over 2000 years, Israel suffered conquest by Egypt, then the powerful Hittite empire, twice by Assyrian forces, then by the Babylonian, Persian and Greek empires before the Roman occupation of Jesus' time. The coastal strip of Israel was a valued trade route, seldom left in peace by its powerful neighbours. There were many reasons for prophets to lament and critique. There was usually a much better future for which the people could be urged to reach. It would have been not unlike our times now when environmental prophets berate humankind for our careless use of natural resources and urge us to do better for future generations.

The prophet Hosea was a prophet of the northern kingdom. He lived, it is thought, during the 6th century before Christ -- that is in the 700's BCE. "In Hosea 5:8 ff., there seems to be a reference to the [Syro-Ephraimite War](#) which led to the capture of the kingdom by the Assyrians (c. 734–732 BC). Hosea's long ministry (ca. 750–725) seems to have ended before the fall of Samaria [to the Assyrians] in 722/721." No doubt he could see the writing on the wall and was interpreting it to his people. The book of Hosea is unusual because it seems to be based on an extended marriage metaphor. It could be the real Hosea married a woman who was later unfaithful to him, but it seems more likely that the man with the unfaithful wife represents a faithful God in covenant with a faithless people. In the short passage which was read today, we hear the voice of God as proclaimed by the prophet yearning for not only a formal master-slave relationship, but a loving relationship as we might ideally hope for between two spouses. Towards the end the God voice is given these words by the prophet to say to Israel: "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge me." It is a good example of the poetry which often forms part of prophetic talk and writing. The prophetic voice is often the voice of a poet and the prophet vision spring from the prophetic imagining of a better way to be in this world. James K Baxter said in 1971

But the poet is a man who holds up a mirror to what is happening. It's the truthfulness of his mirror which is valuable – the moral element in the poem is in its truthfulness. Many people misunderstand this and think that one can just give a message, but the poem, I think, is a mirror. That's the way it is.¹

It is not that all poets are prophets. In fact, Baxter later says that making a poem prophetic often ruins it as a poem. It is more that the prophet uses a poetic imagination and so can articulate the future possibilities with panache and inspiring emotion and stirring words.

The role of prophet is however, extremely uncomfortable. The very need for prophetic words sets up a difficult task for the brave person who will speak out. For generally when the status quo is equitable and just, or sustainable and peaceful, prophetic words are not needed. Prophets speak up and out

¹ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Bax3Pros-t1-g1-t90.html>

when there is complacency, graft, greed and short-term profit taking; when there is injustice and prejudice. Not only do people not like having a mirror held up to their behaviour, often this behaviour is unconscious and so they do not see why they are being targeted, singled out or criticised. A prophetic career is not a route to popularity or material success. It may be satisfying, feeling one is speaking elemental truths, but it is seldom easy. The assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, or Martin Luther King Jr, of Malcolm X, the ill treatment of Archibald Baxter and the vilification of suffragettes and other political prophets uncomfortably remind us of that. Martin Luther King compared his vision for a world where all enjoyed equal rights to the Promised Land. He speaks of this through reference to the God (whom he named as male in his time), the God who allowed Moses to stand on the mountain top and see into the Promised Land, but not to go into it with his people:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

He preached that on April 3 1968. The next day he was dead of an assassin's bullet.

Others carried on King's work. People following Robert and John Kennedy carried on their work. For our world to change we need prophets **and** those who can bring that prophetic vision into reality. We need to be challenged *and* cajoled. Sometimes the prophet can challenge but cannot win enough hearts and minds to ensure effective and sustainable leadership which will achieve the end goal. Sometimes they are killed before they personally can see to it. Issues such as child poverty, homelessness, social welfare and environmental renovation are hard, difficult mountains to climb. The lonely prophet on the windswept heights, though they have glimpsed the Promised land, can often fail in getting others to tackle the steep slopes which lead to that mountain top.

As a Christian faith community we may doubt too our ability to attract and hold a following in our reaching for a just, equal and compassionate world

Yet, as Tennyson said, that poet cited by many a prophet and politician and now today by a preacher, all of us need to keep on constantly seeking that which seems just out of reach:

Come, my friends.

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world....

Though much is taken, much abides; and though

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Let us give thanks for the ancient prophets who kept the faith alive in dire circumstance;

Let us give thanks for those prophets nearer in time whose rhetoric and sacrifice changed our world for the better;

Let us give thanks for the prophets of our own time;

May we, with them, be worthy successors of the long line of prophets
And may we, in their steps, tread up the mountain of hope.

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