

The Prophet and the Preacher
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A few weeks ago I was doing one of my periodic and dreaded clear-outs of 'things that might come in useful one day': magazines, papers, etc., when I noticed some interesting titles of articles, for instance, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War". This is dated August 1990. Now five years is not a long time ago in the great sweep of things, but of course, at the time the article was written, there was still a Soviet Union and Gorbachev was still their leader. The so-called balance of power between East and West still existed. The author's stated thesis, as you might have guessed, is this: "The conditions that have made for decades of peace in the West are fast disappearing, as Europe prepares to return to the multi-polar system that, between 1648 and 1945, bred one destructive conflict after another." Now, of course, with the Bosnian Conflict into its fourth year, and anywhere from 35 to 50 undeclared wars in the former Soviet republics, we could easily call this article 'prophetic'. The author read the signs, knew his history, proclaimed what would be the case, and is for the most part correct: *There is* a general nostalgia for the relative security of the Cold War. But is that *prophecy*? No doubt, in the popular mind, this article would be considered prophetic, inasmuch as prophecy is generally considered to be foretelling the future. But does being prescient, as one might describe the article, or does foretelling the future really have anything to do with prophecy, as biblically understood? In order to lay a foundation for my remarks today I would like to spend a few minutes defining the meaning of the terms 'prophet' and 'prophetic'. I find that it is helpful to know what one *means* as well as what one does *not* mean when using particular terms.

To begin, our English term prophet comes from the Greek προφήτης, which means 'proclaimer or interpreter of divine revelation'. And, of course, the Greek term comes to us by way of the Septuagint, προφήτης being a translation of the Hebrew נָבִי, variously translated as 'spokesman, speaker, prophet'. The Hebrew term is based on, or at least related to, the earlier east Semitic or Akkadian *nabû* which can mean 'to name, to invoke, to summon or call a person to exercise a function, to appoint a person to an office, to decree, to proclaim, to command, to make known'. Just to confine ourselves to the biblical terms, as that is why we are here, prophecy is the job of proclaiming, and the prophet serves as a mouthpiece. Both are used in the service of God, proclaimer and proclamation. So when we talk about biblical, and even ecclesiastical prophecy, we aren't talking about telling the future, we aren't talking about soothsaying and divination these things have more to do with apocalyptic literature than with the prophets. Biblically understood, what we find is that there is a great difference between being *prescient*, as one might well describe the article I have mentioned, and being *prophetic*. Prophecy is basically about *proclamation*; proclamation *in* and *for* the present historical time.

Although I am not a word-counter, I think it interesting to note that whereas נָבִי appears 313 times in the 39 books of the Old Testament, προφήτης appears 149 times in the vastly smaller New Testament. So we can see that the term 'prophet' appears proportionately more often in the New Testament than in the Old. I believe this is worth noting inasmuch as we tend to think of prophecy and mention of prophets to be largely the province of the Old Testament; but then even Jesus refers to himself as a prophet in Matthew 13:57 and in parallel passages in the other synoptic Gospels.

If you should ever be scrolling through a concordance, you will discover that most of the instances in which the terms 'prophet', 'prophecy' and 'prophecy' appear are very specific in terms of time reference and context. Biblical prophecy is rarely generalised proclamation such as, "At some time or t'other, som'ut or t'other will happen." Rather, biblical prophecy is very pointed as regards the message and the audience. Consider that rather humorous episode in the court of Ahab (I Kings 22), when he wishes to enlist Jehoshaphat to do battle with the Syrians in order to help him recapture Ramoth-gilead. Ahab summons the 400 court prophets, who prophecy nothing but good. Perhaps such unanimity makes Jehoshaphat sceptical because, as anyone should do before a major operation, he asks for a second opinion which comes from Micaiah. To cut a long narrative short, you will recall that Micaiah poignantly tells Ahab, "I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd." And, as we know, Micaiah ends up being a majority of one, as Ahab is killed and his army routed. A specific message, for a specific person, in a specific time. If the prophecy involved the future, then of course it was the immediate future, and Ahab himself had a role to play in how the future turned out. It all rested upon his decision in the present. In general, biblical prophecy is a timely message for the present, but one which can well influence the course of events in the future.

There is one biblical book above all others in which the noun 'prophet' and the verb 'prophecy' play a dominant role. Any guesses? It's Jeremiah. In a very real sense it is the classic text on biblical prophecy, and will be much of the focus of our attention in this lecture. As you might expect, there is much mention of Jeremiah's prophecy in the book of Jeremiah, but there is nearly as much attention given to the false prophets and prophecy in general. Take this one instance from among many, from Jeremiah 14:14f; "And the Lord said to me: 'The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.'" Concerning the lying prophets, God says to Jeremiah, "I did not send them, nor did I call them or speak to them." In this disclaimer we can begin to discover something very important about prophecy. A few moments ago I mentioned the root of our term prophet, the Hebrew term נביא, which is related to the earlier East Semitic *nabû*. Remember that this word can mean 'to call a person to exercise a function, to appoint a person to an office'. God says, "I did not *call* them, I did not *send* them." Now think back to Jeremiah's calling: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; *I appointed you a prophet* to the nations." Although it has been disputed, there is a great likelihood that the Hebrew term נביא carries the sense of 'one who has been called [by God]'. In that regard it carries the same sense as the Latin *vocatio*—'calling', vocation. So prophecy, as biblically defined, has one source: God. God calls and then God informs, as with Jeremiah's calling: "To all whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak."

Now there are two hallmarks of prophecy which shine clearly throughout Jeremiah and throughout the book they go together like toast and butter. ויהי דבר־יהוה אלי "The word of the Lord came to me" and כה אמר יהוה "Thus says the Lord". Again, to cite the calling of Jeremiah, "Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.'" God calls and God informs. God is the source of the message and the messenger.

Now, everything that I have shared thus far has served as a prelude or introduction to

what prophecy means to preaching today, but it was necessary to define our terms of reference. So let's briefly recapitulate. Prophecy is *specific*. It doesn't get announced through flowers, trees and furry animals; rather, it comes to and through an individual who is called by God. In that regard we may say that prophecy is *personal*. Again, think of the calls of Jeremiah, Elisha and Hosea. Like the National Lottery adverts, God says, "It's you!" The message of the prophet is also specific, and even personal, as it is directed to specific persons, e.g. the Israelites or to a specific person, e.g. the king, in a specific time.

Here's where we preachers come into all this. So let me begin this section by asking some questions: Can we preach without being called? If we preach without being called, *whose* word are we preaching? Can we preach without being prophets? Can we be both pastors *and* prophets? Can we be evangelists without being prophets?

Let's consider the call to preach God's word. How many of you asked or prayed for a calling? How many of you were elated when you knew you had been called by God? Anyone sobered or daunted by the call? Jeremiah and his earlier colleague, Isaiah, give us two antithetical responses to the call of God. Isaiah is like the keen schoolboy whose hand goes up the minute the teacher asks for help, "Choose me, choose me!!" And then there's Jeremiah, "Couldn't you pick someone else?!" Isaiah is cocksure of himself and Jeremiah wishes he had stayed in bed. And yet ironically, we have more personal information regarding reluctant Jeremiah than we do about keen Isaiah (all *three* Isaiahs for that matter!). What we all know is that being a prophet really is *not* the best way to win friends or even influence people. Fancy that, even being called by God doesn't carry much weight, with political bigwigs or even the local congregation—it didn't in the first millennium BC and it doesn't now! (I'm sure you are all surprised by this.) [If you will permit me a personal comment, if any preacher here does not know him- or herself to be called by God, then go check it out. It's not worth the headaches if you aren't.]

Now the really quick ones amongst us will have picked up that I am already blurring the distinction between prophet and preacher. And 'tis true. Mea culpa. The call to preach God's word cannot escape the fact that the word of the Lord is a "two-edged sword", which comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. The Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments attest to this. But preachers today have a problem that the biblical prophets didn't have: *residency*. We reside in the communities in which we preach; and, in most cases the churches or parishes own our houses. And not only that, but we also have pastoral responsibility for the people to whom we preach. For me, this creates one of the biggest tensions within ministry: walking the razor's edge dividing the prophetic from the pastoral ministry.

Let me use a personal example, which involved afflicting the comfortable. You will remember the Windsor Castle fire which occurred nearly three years ago. The following Sunday our worship group had arranged a worship service on homelessness—which is quite a problem in Folkestone. We had in the neighbourhood of 290 statutorily homeless people at that time. You will recall as well, that the then Heritage Secretary, Peter Brooke, announced—nearly before the flames had died down at Windsor—that the public—Joe and Jane Taxpayer—would pick up the tab on the repairs of this national treasure. At that time, the latest economic survey stated that an average of 103 families were going bankrupt every

day—losing their homes and possessions. Now add to this the fact that the immediate royal family have over 2,000 rooms in which to live. And add to this, the fact that at this same time, one family in my church were having to give up their home, and two families with adult children had seen their offspring relinquish the keys to their flats, as they had negative equity and could no longer afford their homes in those bad economic times. Now comes the good bit. Anyone remember or want to guess what was on the lectionary for that Sunday? Our good friend Jeremiah, chapter 22, God's words to the king Jehoiakim, who was stripping the nation's coffers to build a grand palace. "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing, and who does not give him wages; who says, 'I will build myself a great house with spacious rooms', and cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?" And God adds a sting in the tail by saying to Jehoiakim, "But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself... that this house shall become a desolation."

Well, with some trepidation I preached my sermon, and a mighty ruckus it did cause. I was excoriated at the church door by several folk ("I don't come here to listen to political sermons!") and it virtually took months to repair the 'fallout' on the pastoral side of things. Well, I didn't start the fire at Windsor Castle, I didn't cause poor economic climate and the job losses, and I didn't write the lectionary—but I knew what I had to preach: the thoughtlessness of a government which saw a priority in restoring a castle rather than address the homeless and jobless situation. I was indeed hurt by many of the things that were said to me, but then I would do it again if all those same conditions obtained. Now I don't share this with you to say what a brave chap I am. Perhaps I'm a fool. But anyone who has preached for any length of time knows when the word must come out, like Luther's, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." Consider Jeremiah's lament in chapter 20: "I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me... For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." Jeremiah knew all-too-well what it was like to afflict the comfortable. It's a great temptation for us just to let things ride, to let sleeping dogs lie. Recall that when Micaiah was asked to give his prophecy to Ahab, his first response was to go along with the 400 court prophets and to tell the king what he wanted to hear. "Go up and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hands of the king." Why make life needlessly difficult? As priests, ministers, pastors aren't we more interested in the "cure of souls"?

The problem for us preachers is that we don't have many good biblical models for what we try to do. Priests and rabbis weren't prophets, and the prophets were thrown into dungeons or had to head for the hills to preserve their lives. How do you take care of the 8.00 AM Eucharist if you're hiding out and living rough?! To make matters worse, even our Lord didn't stick it out for very long in one locale. He travelled about, taught and healed people, and when the pressure got too great he 'split'—took to the mountains, went for a boat ride, etc. Perhaps itinerancy is the answer to preaching the word prophetically?! Live in a caravan and be prepared for short notice moves! New age preachers!

So, how are we to overcome, or at least cope, with this problem of being both prophet

and pastor, disturber and comforter? I offer two solutions. First solution: the prophetic word we preach must be God's and not our own. To the best of our knowledge it must be God's word to and through us for our particular situation; a word in season. ויהי דבר־יהוה אלי and כה אמר יהוה—those two prophetic hallmarks from Jeremiah are as applicable today as in biblical times. For ours is not merely an *historical* witness to prophecy of old, but a *present* witness to the word of God in our lives today. "The word of the Lord came to me..." and "Thus says the Lord..." must be ours as well; and this means that we must take the necessary time in our lives and routines to listen to God's voice to us. (This is another entire topic!—spiritual nourishment.) God doesn't simply call his prophets and then abandon them.

For our part we must not assume that once we have been called by God that we can blithely go our own way. The authority of prophecy must be God's, that's the only basis we have for preaching it; for it is on God's authority that we are called to preach. And we should never underestimate the breadth of prophetic concern. To stick with Jeremiah, in addition to theological and moral commentary, we find social and political commentary (as with the sermon I preached), and even ecological commentary, e.g.: "Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness; desolate it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate..." (Jer. 12:10f) Nothing is exempt from God's prophetic word. But again, the prophecy we preach must begin with and rest upon God's word, God's authority. If people still choose to reject the word, then that is between them and God. But *pastorally* at least, it gives us an 'out'. For it is not Jack Lawson standing before people giving them his manifesto on how they should behave or how they should treat the homeless and hungry, rather it is Jack Lawson serving as the mouthpiece for the word of God; Jack Lawson in the office of prophet.

This leads to the second solution which I offer in the balancing act between pastoral and prophetic ministry: It is also true that if we do our pastoral work well, if we truly love and care for those in our pastoral charge, then they will be better disposed to hear the prophetic words. This is the "comforting" side of the two-edged sword. Because one thing that is always in operation between clergy and congregation, though rarely spoken, is, "Do you really love me? Do you really love us?" If our pastoral care is such that they know the answer is "Yes", then they can handle the discomfort or even chastisement which the word of God can bring. And of course, if the congregation know, or perceive, that we do *not* love them, that we only tolerate them or are in that church or parish under sufferance, then the sharp edge of prophetic preaching will cleave us and them, and we will find ourselves isolated and under attack. Again, I don't know of a finer balancing act in ministry than that of the pastoral and prophetic roles. And this applies as much to chaplaincies and social ministries as it does to parish work. I spent seven years as a prison chaplain and had to perform the same balancing act.

Within the necessary time limitations of a single lecture I realise that I have dwelt more on one side of the two-edged sword of God's word: that of afflicting the comfortable or perhaps the culpable. This is because, for us as preachers, it is the more fraught and problematic of the two. But the prophetic sword does have its other edge, as I have just mentioned regarding our pastoral role, that other edge is: comforting the afflicted. In this regard I would suggest that evangelism, or telling the good news of Jesus Christ, also falls within the prophetic role. (Perhaps we can explore this a bit more during discussion time after my lecture.) The telling of the forgiving and redeeming love of God in Christ to

specific people in their specific situations today certainly qualifies as comforting the afflicted. And of course, even the prophets in the Old Testament were called by God to "comfort my people"—so prophecy is by no means all doom and gloom. Again, our Lord himself was called a prophet, as was John the Baptist who proclaimed his coming. The Gospel of Luke has Jesus beginning his ministry in this way: Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, rolls open the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads the following: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19; Is. 61:1-2, 58:6) Good news. And, of course, at the conclusion to Matthew's Gospel we have what is known as the "great commission": Jesus' instruction to tell his good news and to baptize. So again, through Christ, God both calls the disciples to be prophets and provides the message. In the final analysis, we, as Christian preachers, have the one principal model for our prophetic role and that is Jesus. And like those who came before him, Jesus spoke both the disturbing and the reassuring word of God to groups and to individuals, and by the fact that he proclaimed to people what was given him by the Father, he was *prophetic*; speaking to the specific needs of specific people in their time. "Thus says the Lord..." This is our task as well.

In conclusion, one thing has become abundantly clear to me in preparing this lecture on the prophet and the preacher—and for that alone I thank Eric Young for giving me this opportunity—and it is this: The specificity of our individual callings, the fact that God calls us as *persons*, ensures that the word is *personally* located, *personally present*, in the various communities of God's people: be it urban squalor, university town, country village; the locus of God's word is in the lives of people. The word comes in their conditions and speaks to their conditions, and that, *that is prophecy*.