

4B Conventual 2024

Jesus the Prophet

A key point in today's Gospel is that Jesus taught with deep seated authority. He taught with such authority that even the demons could stand in awe and say: "*I know who you are: you are the Holy One of God.*" Our first reading fills in the background. Jesus is the prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy. *I will raise up a prophet and put my words into his mouth* says the Lord God. But people recognized in Jesus not just a man speaking with God's words, God's voice, but a man speaking with his own authority.

What is a prophet? I am sure you can name some in the Old Testament. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah. We tend to think of prophets as looking into the future - **foretelling**: predicting what is to be. But if we just see them, for example, as foretelling the coming of Christ, then their job is done. We need not bother with them or their message. But foretelling was just part of their call. Their call was as much about **forthtelling**, telling forth - what we might call today 'speaking truth to power.' The prophets channelled God's voice to expose and challenge the injustices in society.

There was a remarkable American Jewish Rabbi called Abraham Heschel, who wrote a rather large book on the prophets. He described them "*the most disturbing people who ever lived*" and he says it is because for them **God's love is not a theory** but something that they experienced.

Heschel was an academic, happy in the world of ideas. But he said that his encounter with the Prophets changed his life. They took him away from academia and taught him that he had to be involved in human affairs. And so, he marched with Martin Luther King, protested against the Vietnam War, and was invited as observer at the Second Vatican Council. The prophets call us to action. Jesus calls us to action.

Abraham Heschel came to see the whole history of Israel not as Man's search for God, but God's search for Man. He speaks of the Divine Pathos "*(pathos from the Greek root denoting emotion, feeling, passion) - God's outraged response to our sins and his merciful response to our suffering and anguish. At the beginning of the Exodus story, we read that "God heard, God remembered, God saw, God came down."* That is a great expression of our faith, of a God who came down and became involved in human affairs, whose Son, Jesus takes flesh in our midst.

So the Bible is a love story of God's passion for us. God creates out of love, fashions a world, a people, a bride, a Son, a Church. God's love affair with Israel is nothing but passionate. This Divine Pathos is described as the intense love of mother and child, father and child, husband and wife. Jeremiah cries: *You seduced me O God and I am seduced*. God woos and entices Israel to a covenant of love.

And so we can think of Jesus as a prophet, and more than a prophet, who had this intense experience of himself as the Beloved of the Father, and knew every man and woman around him was loved too. His authority was to speak out of this knowledge of a God whose nature is the power of love.

So he would rail against injustice. He would raise his voice to corrupt religious and political authorities. He would say: *"You whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of dead people's bones. You brood of vipers."* He would expel the moneychangers from the Temple. Go, learn the meaning of the phrase *'I desire mercy not sacrifice'* he would say. And he continues to speak directly to our world and its greed, its injustice, its disregard for human life, its lack of equality. Racial Justice Sunday. Collection for Life Charity.

The prophets were lonely figures, and their words often went unheeded. Jeremiah says (25:3): *"For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened."* We will see in the Gospel Jesus' increasing isolation as he nears his Passion. Yet he burns with a zeal, burns with a love of the poor and oppressed, for the marginalised and the outcast of society.

One of the most remarkable things about the Bible is that the story is told from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, and conquered. This is what makes it prophetic. History is usually written by the winners, but in the case of the Bible it's the opposite. It is written from the bottom-up, that is what makes the prophets so subversive. There is hope in the pages of the Bible. Mary would channel the women of the Old Testament in singing her Magnificat of the mighty cast down from their thrones.

Justice is the public face of love and again it is not just an idea. Justice is a Divine concern because there is a living God who cares. To ancient societies that valued wealth and power, the prophets were voices of powerful rebuke. Truth, kindness, justice and compassion. They distrusted power, their words made their audiences uncomfortable, and can still make us uncomfortable today. If we tame their voices, we tame God's passion.

We need the voice of the prophets today and to attend to the challenges of Jesus for truth, justice and integrity. And every generation needs its own prophets to help create a just society centered on God.

In our baptism we were anointed into Christ's manner of living as a prophet. It means seeking the truth and telling the truth. It means living with honesty and integrity. We have to find our own way to speak the truth and love what is right.

I will finish with some words of Abraham Heschel that challenge us to attend to the true meaning of our faith and what should be at the heart of religion:

When **faith** is completely replaced by **creed**,
worship by **discipline**, **love** by **habit**;
when the **crisis of today** is ignored because of the **splendour of the past**;
when **faith** becomes an **heirloom**, rather than a **living fountain**;
when **religion** speaks only in the name of **authority**
rather than with the **voice of compassion**,
its message becomes **meaningless**.

We mustn't empty our faith of its challenge and meaning.