

Prophets and Prophecy – a layman’s reflections.

“And I believe in the Holy Ghostwho spake by the prophets”

Nicene Creed

As a student I listened on the radio to the Brains Trust. Professor Joad was a panelist and he would frequently begin his answer to a question with the words; “It all depends what you *mean*.”

So it is necessary to first define the nature of prophecy then describe the characteristics of a true prophet and thirdly discuss the prophetic role of Christ as we bring our thoughts to bear upon Christ –as prophet, priest and king.

Nature of prophecy. Prophecy is essentially the *proclamation* and *interpretation* of the divine mind and will as revealed through prayer and contemplation but also, (as recorded in the OT), via dreams, visions, and ecstatic or mystical experiences. On 293 occasions in the OT these proclamations are preceded by the prophetic formula “Thus says the Lord” – (or very similar words) but Aquinas warns that because prophecy is a transient event, rather than a habit, the same person might prophecy both truth and falsehood depending upon whether or not he/she had been touched by the Spirit of God.

Discerning between true and false prophecy is important and it is hard to believe that the prophets were totally unaffected by prevailing fashionable thoughts and attitudes. Since the means through which a prophetic utterance might be made included ecstatic states induced by mutual contagion through dance and music a prophecy requires to be tested – but against what? It is possible that initially a prophecy might have been deemed true if it was not inconsistent with the Mosaic Laws and their derived commentaries since biblical tradition traces the origin of Israelite prophecy to Moses.

Over time the fundamental Mosaic Laws were critically applied by the priests to every conceivable aspect of life and in minute detail with the ever present danger of the letter of the Law taking precedence over the spirit.. It appears to me, reading scripture as a layman, that the prophets were aware of this danger and constantly tried to bring both priests and people back to the essence of the Law. They require us to walk humbly before the Lord our God, have a bias towards the poor and afflicted and exercise the golden rule of doing to others what you would wish them to do to you. Additionally the prophets emphasize a peace that is much more than simply an absence of strife, justice, righteousness and personal morality devoid of hypocrisy. A perpetual reminder of, and recall to, fundamentals. To quote Rowan Williams , “Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea are constantly saying to the people of Israel; Don’t’ you remember who you are? Don’t’ you remember what God has called you to be? Here you are sitting down comfortably with all kinds of inequality, injustice and corruption in your society. Have you forgotten completely what you are here for?” *They* would say the same to us today. But who today constitutes “*they*” and to whom and how should “*they*” speak effectively? Perhaps this something we all need to think about during Lent.

Given the highly controversial nature of such matters as justice and righteousness it is not hard to see why today discernment falls back upon conscience and, and the teaching of the Church. But only so far. The spirit blows where it will and God cannot be constrained so from time to time a true prophet may arise and will be led by the spirit, as our Lord promised, into new truths.

However these revelations will never be in conflict with the *spirit* of the old and indeed a fundamental purpose of the Christian prophet is to, time after time, bring us back to our Christian basics, to what is required of us in public and private life and keep posing questions to all in authority. Indeed spelling out the probable consequences of disobedience to the spirit of the Law has been largely responsible, understandably, for the frequently mistaken notion that foretelling the future is the major role of the prophet.

Characteristics of a true prophet.

In my Concordance there is reference to only 57 “foretelling” prophecies, 7 of which are in the NT **but 539** references including **132** in the NT where the prophetic utterance is a call to return to the Law and the spirit of the Law via confession, repentance and amendment of life.

Christians are familiar with this function of the prophet in the life of John the Baptist and the frequently harsh prophetic words of Jesus, The whole of Matthew Chapter 23 for example is blistering stuff; not for those of a delicate disposition.

If we pull all this together then a true prophet emerges as a person of prayer, holiness of life, conviction, courage and outspokenness. And let us be quite clear they may be either male or female. In this context one can argue that, since Miriam, the only female prophet recorded in the Pentateuch, helped preserve the baby Moses she should have her status elevated. Sometime later the prophet Deborah appears as a feisty administrator and commander of the military in contrast to the homely Miriam. In the New Testament we read in Acts 21:9 that the evangelist Philip had four unmarried daughters who possessed the gift of prophecy but we do not know whether they were foretellers or reminders. However it appears that while the Church has never officially applied the term “prophet” to anyone not so named in Scripture it is clear that God has spoken prophetically through such persons as St Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Bonhoeffer, Father Oscar Romero and many others.

Prophet, Priest and King.

When we come to study the prophetic Christ we encounter, additionally, what today would be called a real “game changer” So important is this particular prophetic utterance that the Church devotes a whole day for reflection upon it and gives that day the rare accolade of its own name: Maundy Thursday.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus consistently upheld the importance of the Law and He harshly castigated the priests of the day for failing to live and practice in the spirit of the Law as well as the letter. The Law is to be lived in the spirit but not displaced or replaced. However he *changed the emphasis* from what is frequently negative in the Hebrew scriptures (Psalm 15 for example) from not harming your neighbour, to a positive emphasis on loving your neighbour

John’s Gospel is brilliantly structured. Nothing sticks in the mind quite like someone’s last words so John brings the crucial tenants of the Faith into what we know as the farewell discourses. The washing of the feet, the act of the servant king, has a message nobody can misunderstand but Maundy Thursday is not named after this act (nor the antecedent of our Eucharist) but after the mandate recorded in John Ch.13 v34-35 “ I gave you a new commandment: love one another; **as I have loved you**, so you are to love one another. If there is **this** love among you, then all will know that you are my disciples” Therein is the game changer. Love as I loved. **This kind of love.** Sacrificial love. It is impossible to overstate the significance of these words.

The ancient Greeks had four words for “love”;

Storge which equates to our “affection” – for example the love of parents for their children; Philia- which equates to Friendship, one of the greatest gifts of God to all humanity; Eros which includes sexuality but so much more and Agape the disinterested love manifest in good works and true benevolence towards people we may not even know – for example in our charitable giving. These four “loves” are, of course, neither negated nor replaced but a fifth “love” is added by Jesus – sacrificial love. This love is described in the familiar verses of Corinthians 13. And it is unfashionable. It is part of Christian conversion for it turns the world upside down. We are commanded, not requested, to a life not only of service but of sacrificial love. Love to the uttermost. Love that will frequently be mocked as the act of a loser, a wimp, the complete antithesis of the assertive lessons young managers are encouraged to attend. Philippians 2 v 6-9 (“ For the divine nature was His from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God but made himself nothing assuming the nature of a slave, etc”)To be submissive one to another – as the priest who prepared me for marriage said “a Christian marriage is a union of two servants and no masters” is seriously counter-culture in the 21st century. It invokes protest from within but it is the love of Christ – the giving of everything, life itself if required, for another and not just any other but another who may be your enemy. Love like this is not some sentimental sugary emotion. The servant is not greater than the master and the master pleaded in agony with his father for His life that Maundy Thursday but in the end he submitted. That love for the world cost his life. He indeed wept over and for Jerusalem.

Christ in His prophetic role calls us to this kind of love. Such love is unlikely for us to end in death, but in the actual world in which you and I live the place where sacrificial love will be required, far from exclusively but probably most frequently, is in our homes. My priestly teachers tell me that you and I are the Church, the body of Christ, and that loving body is to be constantly broken, sacrificed, for the life of the world.