

Sermon: Prophecy and Inspired Foolery

I wonder what picture you form in your mind of those great men the prophets in the Old Testament – men such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea? Perhaps you see them as strolling scholars and orators like the philosophers of ancient Greece? Or upright, elderly and very stern moralists like Scottish Calvinists, all Geneva gowns and disapproval? Well, they weren't like that at all. The prophets were more like inspired poets, who uttered their prophecies in ecstatic speech, sometimes going into a trance; at other times behaving in a style we might think crazy. They sometimes acted like clowns.

There was the prophet who deliberately bandaged his eyes before he gave a warning to King Ahab. Ahijah tore his mantle into twelve pieces and gave King Jeroboam ten of them. That was his way of saying that God was about to take ten tribes away from Solomon's kingdom and give them to Jeroboam. They often couched their warnings in jokes, puns and figures of speech. Amos, for instance, declared that the end was nigh. He announced this by bringing in a basket of summer fruit. The Hebrew for summer fruit is *kayis* and the word for *end* sounds like it: *kes*. A bit of macabre humour to disguise a dire warning.

Isaiah took his son to prophesy the downfall of Damascus. He named his son *Maher Shalal Hash Baz* which means *Spoil hastens - plunder hurries*. Jeremiah went around smashing bottles as a sign of the breaking of the nation. Isaiah even went in for tongue-twisters and a bizarre use of assonance. When he asked if the people thought he had come to teach wisdom to babes at the breast, he said this: *saw-lasaw saw-lasaw kaw-lakaw kaw lakaw*. I suppose they thought he was mad, and in a sense they were right. But he was mad in the way that King Lear's fool was mad. The Holy Fool with prescience and profound moral insight.

The prophets were satirists. When I hear that it's not only illegal drugs that are being smuggled by being hidden up traffickers' bottoms, but mobile phones as well, I can easily imagine a modern Isaiah mocking our decadents and our contemporary philistines by stuffing an I-pod up his rear end. In a world gone mad, the only sign people will heed is the absurd.

So what can we learn from the prophets? Most of them lived at the temple in Jerusalem – the temple was the spiritual and political centre of the nation; where the king held court. The prophets were, so to speak, on the staff. Their function was to speak the word of God to the nation through addressing the king. Most of them were false prophets who made a good living by telling the king what he wanted to hear. Words to tickle his ears. Then there were the true prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

What happened repeatedly was this. The people would be in great trouble – think of their slavery in Egypt. They would pray and the prophet – Moses was the first – would lead them to deliverance by the hand of God. The people would be truly thankful – for about five minutes – and then they would start to go wrong, forgetting God's commandments – think of the licentious incident of the Golden Calf. The prophet would then pronounce God's judgement.

Then later, they were settled in the Promised Land, in Jerusalem, ruled over by King Solomon, the great temple administered by the Levitical Priesthood. Some of the people, tempted by rewards from entrepreneurs and usurpers, would strike out on their own and set up rival shrines in the hills, make money and exercise influence there. They would be rebuked, God's judgement pronounced by the true prophets.

So always the pattern was the same: trouble followed by God's deliverance; a brief period of thankfulness and good behaviour; then a falling off and a neglect of God's law; then the prophet would prophesy that if they carried on like that they were heading for a catastrophe; everybody would ridicule the prophet – calling him a Jeremiah perhaps; then the catastrophe would come to pass; the nation would be almost destroyed; sometimes there followed repentance, return and restoration.

So that's what we learn from the biblical prophets: that their times were very much like ours. We are in the late falling off stage. We are lost in one of those periods of turning away from God and thinking we can get by without all those old and out of date commandments. I've told you – this is nothing new. There have always been sophisticated people. They were there in ancient Israel. They imagined themselves enlightened and self-sufficient. They esteemed themselves and forgot God. When the prophet told them they were heading for catastrophe, they threw the prophet into jail or stoned him to death. But whatever they did with him, they took no notice of him. What do we need with obedience when we have libertarianism – masquerading as equality and freedom of speech? What need for the fear of God when there's democracy?

We are in our Golden Calf period. The people and the government are borrowing beyond their purse to live beyond their means. The prophet says there will be a reckoning. The Israelites went after false gods. We have the celebrity culture. God gave us sacred, everlasting laws. We think we know better. We think God's laws disposable. We have *equality* and *diversity* instead which means a sexual free for all. God has not only given us laws, he has taught us through our history. But we despise our history – that's what's symbolised in the widespread hatred for the hymn *Jerusalem* among so many of the clergy.

Not only has God given us commandments and history lessons, he has also given us wisdom, the gift of discernment. He has, for instance, given us Shakespeare and Euclid, Bach and Rembrandt. Wisdom, says *The Book of Proverbs*, is above rubies. God is an unashamed elitist. But our schools teach any old – usually new – sub-literary tosh equal to Shakespeare. Our Culture Secretary tells us that our Bach, Beethoven and Mozart in the Proms is *not sufficiently accessible*.

We must have rock and pop and rap as well. In other words we must deny wisdom, blaspheme discernment and worship trash. A professor of physics told me last week that there is not much new work in mathematics being done – because the universities and the schools have let standards slip. Forty-three per cent of our pupils – on the government's own figures – leave school after eleven years of state education – that oxymoron – unable to read, write or count.

What would Isaiah say? In his ecstatic utterance, tearing his mantle into pieces, shouting in the street like a madman, he would say to us now what he said to them then:

How is the faithful city become a harlot! It was full of judgement; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Thy silver is become dross. Thy princes are rebellious. Thou art companions of thieves. Everyone loveth gifts and followeth after rewards...Behold the loftiness of man shall be bowed down; and the haughtiness of man shall be brought low...behold the Lord shall take away the bravery of thy tinkling ornaments...the chains and the bracelets and the mufflers, the bonnets and the ornaments of the legs and the headbands and the earrings and nose jewels...and the mantles and the wimples and the crisping pins, the glasses and the fine linen and the hoods and the veils

And it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be a stink. And instead of a girdle, a rent. Instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a stomacher a girding of sackcloth; and burning instead of beauty. Thy men shall fall by the sword and thy mighty in the war.

Our Lord said, *Which of the prophets did not your fathers stone?* If you say these things now, you are derided as a pessimist. Part of the livery movement is arranging a lecture this year as an antidote to what I said on the same occasion last year. But the prophetic message is not pessimistic. It is realistic. There is hope, but the only hope is hope in God. Don't shoot the messenger. Heed what he says:

Turn ye, saith the Lord, from all your wickedness, and your sin shall not be your destruction. Cast away from you all the ungodliness that you have done. Make you new hearts and a new spirit. Turn ye then, and ye shall live.