

Brancepeth Sermon: Prophecy

4th July 2021

Mike Higton

Ezekiel 2:1–5; Psalm 123; Mark 6:1–13

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

Our readings today are all about *prophecy*.
That may seem like a strange topic,
perhaps a bit over the top for Brancepeth.
But there's a line in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians
where he says he would like
all of the members of the church to prophesy.

So that's the message of my sermon this morning:
I would like *all* of us in St Brandon's to prophesy –
and that includes those of you at home on Zoom;
don't think that you get away with not prophesying
just because I can't see you at the moment!

So, yes: I think God wants us all to be prophets.

But that is not about foretelling the future.

I am not suggesting you should all be able to stand up
and declare to us all
when exactly singing will be allowed again in churches,
or who is going to win some football tournament
that I am told is going on at the moment.

Nor am I suggesting that any of you should put on
one of those sandwich boards,
and parade up and down The Village
displaying the message that ‘The End is Nigh!’

That is not, on the whole, what prophecy means
in the biblical passages that we’re considering this morning.
No. Prophecy is about something rather different.

So let’s start with Ezekiel. In the passage we heard earlier,
Ezekiel tells the story of his commissioning as a prophet.
It is not so much a commission to predict the future
as a commission to speak
to the ‘impudent and stubborn’ people who surround him.
That is, he finds himself commissions to *call them out*
for the ways in which they have turned away from God.
He finds himself commissioned
to call them out for the ways they have turned away from justice
to call them out for the ways they have turned away from mercy.

When he describes his calling as a prophet,
Ezekiel says that ‘a spirit entered into me
and set me on my feet;
and I heard him speaking to me’

I want you to imagine what that might have been like.

Think of Ezekiel as an onlooker.

He’s watching the world around him
with a growing sense of unease, of discomfort.

He knows that things are *not right* –
and the more he looks, the worse it seems.

Instead of mellowing, as time goes by, he finds
himself getting more agitated.

He finds himself carrying around a growing sense,
like a constant twist in his stomach,
that he simply can’t stay silent.

He sees the injustice that flourishes around him,
and he sees the way most people just shrug about it.

He sees the way they seem to ignore it, or brush it off.

He sees the casual disregard with which the poor, the lonely,
the marginalised, the weak are treated,
as well as the outright exploitation they sometimes face.

And, like our Psalmist today, he finds that he has had
more than enough of this contempt.

Remember those words from the Psalm today:

‘Our soul has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.’

Perhaps Ezekiel clenches his teeth against this feeling.

Perhaps he tells himself to leave it alone,
not to get involved, not to make a fuss.

Perhaps he tells himself to do whatever
the ancient Israelite version is of stopping watching the news,
or stepping back from social media,
so that he won’t have to see the stuff that upsets him.

But the sense of disquiet, the sense of incredulity,
the sense that the world is out of joint,
that people are being hurt
and that nobody seems to care –
that feeling boils up within him until it feels like it is burning,
until he *can’t* stay silent,
until one day he finds himself on his feet in the marketplace,
with the words pouring out
almost as if they were pouring through him
from somewhere else,
from *someone* else.

He knows he won't make friends
by speaking up and speaking out.
He knows that most people will ignore him,
and that some will react angrily –
but that doesn't matter. He simply *has* to speak.

'Whether they hear or refuse to hear', he says,
'they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.'
Ezekiel becomes that prophet
when he speaks up, and speaks out.

Look at Jesus in the synagogue, as well –
in his local synagogue,
where he encounters this wounding rejection
by his *own* community, by people who know him,
the people amongst whom he has worked as a carpenter.

It is not primarily the miracles that upset people.
It is not that he claims to be able to do strange deeds of power
and that they think him too ordinary to be capable of it.
It's not that they don't really believe he can heal.
(In fact, there's that wonderful line telling us
'he could do no deed of power there, *except that*
he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them' –
as if that was nothing much, nothing in particular.)

No. What upsets the congregation in the synagogue is not first of all what he does or claims to be able to do.

It is what he *says*. It is what they *hear*.

‘Many who *heard* him were astounded.’

They think, ‘Where do these words he’s saying come from?’

What right has he to say them?’

What did he say to get this reaction?

Well, he spoke as a prophet.

When Luke tells his version of the story of

Jesus visiting the synagogue in Nazareth,

he tells us that Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah,

and applied Isaiah’s words to himself:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring *good news to the poor*.

He has sent me to proclaim *release to the captives*

and recovery of sight to the *blind*,

to let the *oppressed* go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

In other words, in that synagogue,

amongst his own community

Jesus spoke up, and he spoke out

for the poor, *for* the blind and the oppressed –

and that meant speaking out *against*

injustice, oppression, and disregard,

against the scorn of those who are at ease,
and the contempt of the proud.

After all, the most common summary of Jesus' preaching
in the gospels is that he called people to *repent* –
to repent, to turn around, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand,
to repent, to turn around, because the kingdom of God's justice is at hand,
to repent, to turn around, because the kingdom of God's mercy is at hand.

And Jesus commissions his followers to do the same.

In our passage from Mark,
he sends out his own disciples to do this:
'So *they* went out', we read,
'and proclaimed that all should repent.'
They went, and they spoke up, and they spoke out,
in Jesus' name.

So, that's what I mean when I say we should all be prophets.

I mean that we should all be people who
in our own ways, in our own contexts,
in those places where we have some kind of voice,
however small –
we should be people who speak up, and speak out.

This isn't just a calling for the likes of Ezekiel.

It isn't just a calling for Jesus.

It is a task and a calling for all of Jesus' followers.

It is a task and a calling for all of us.

But I want to be clear about what this task involves,
because the church has often got this very wrong,
this speaking up, and speaking out.

It's not about finger-wagging,
telling people off for doing things we don't like.

It's not about policing people's peccadilloes,
criticising them for not living up to our expectations.

It's not about trying to enforce respectability,
keeping up appearances at all costs –
normally a cost to others, and not to ourselves.

And it's certainly not about preserving our own comfort,
or about criticising people when they turn out not to be like us,
or about imposing our culture, our way of life, onto others.

This is about the *kingdom*.

Jesus' message is

'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand':

the kingdom of love,

the kingdom of justice,

the kingdom of mercy.

So our calling to speak up, and to speak out,
is always and only about speaking up and speaking out
for love, justice, and mercy.

For us all to be prophets in *this* sense,
is for us all to *care* about love,
for us all to *care* about justice,
for us all to *care* about mercy.

It is for us to become people who care enough that we
are not very good at staying silent
about love, justice, and mercy,
when we see them being ignored or betrayed.

It is for us to become people who
are willing to risk irritating those around us,
willing to risk getting a name for being awkward,
willing to ruffle feathers, and disturb peace,
because we do speak up for love, justice, and mercy –
in any context where we have a voice,
in any context where we have an opportunity to
make a difference.

Jesus calls us, his followers, to speak up, and to speak out.

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There's a story in the book of Numbers,
from when Israel was wandering in the wilderness,
on the way to the promised land,
with Moses as their leader.

Two men, Eldad and Medad, start prophesying in the camp
And here's what happens next:

'A young man ran and told Moses,
"Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses,
one of his chosen men, said,

"My lord Moses, stop them!"

But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake?

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets,
and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

And that's my prayer today:

'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets,
and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!'

Father,

Fill us with your Spirit,

make us discerning observers of the world around us,

and impel us to speak up, and to speak out

as your Spirit prompts —

speaking up and speaking out for your kingdom,

for your love, justice and mercy,

in the name of your son,

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.