



3 February 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 364 “O for a thousand tongues to sing”
 658 “A charge to keep I have”
 161 “Speak, O Lord, as we come to you”
 592 “Let us break bread together”
 682 “God of grace and God of glory”

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10,
 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
 Luke 4:21-30

“HOW TO BE A PROPHET”

Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, guide us to hear and see and know your presence and purpose in the scripture today. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Friends, today is a day that needs prophets. We have heard the call of Jeremiah – God saying I have put my words in your mouth, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. And St Paul’s great ‘power ballad’ to love. And Jesus, disappointing his hometown crowd such that they don’t just turn away, but actually try to carry him off to put him over a cliff.

Last week everyone was marvelling at the thrilling words he said, greatly pleased – and if you were worshipping here last week, we reflected about memory, and how he used it, gave it back to people.

Yet so quickly they turn, such is the anxiety of the age – I have a sense of a people traumatised, disappointed over and over again, working out not just their disappointment with Jesus, but their disappointment with a whole line of promises.

Today is a day that needs prophets – why? Because we too are in a moment pregnant with disappointments and anxieties. A time in which it feels like one group or another is ripe to throw someone off a cliff.

I find resonance with WB Yeats words, written almost exactly 100 years ago, from the poem the Second Coming -

*The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Things fall apart – a blood dimmed tide is loosed – violence as wars and conflicts play out, equalled by the slower moving violence of poverty, of rising populism and nationalism, the commodification of persons.

The blood dimmed tide is loosed – and those of us with insurance plans or savings might have an option to pull up our drawbridges and wring our hands. Indeed, we are counselled to do just this!

And those of us without passports, or without savings, or without powerful advocates, may pray.

And yet. We need prophets, today – and we have prophets today – who tell a different story.

I think you are sitting here today among companions who are among that “best,” and you do not lack conviction. Your voices, diverse political views among them, diverse insights, myriad passports and experience – nevertheless wise, strong, gathered here.

We live in a moment that needs prophets. And this is why: when we do not speak, for whatever reason –when we do not hold to the great story that says enemies may yet be reconciled, and each person is made in God’s image, and all that flows from that – then others tell other stories – that you must look after your own first. That in a time of diminishing resources, you must compete and push others away. That a horde is coming, that what little we have will be lost.

As I eavesdrop on this community and hear you speak with words and lives and service, and our wider church, you do not lack conviction, but proclaim an alternative narrative about human value, about education, about opportunity – about welcome for the stranger - and you live as a testimony to it.

We need prophets. And this is why – not to shame people who think differently or beat them back into silence – not to drive them out, send them over their own cliff, but to tell a better story. A more truthful story, a more Godly, graceful story.

But it is not just a question of WHY we need prophets, but HOW to be one. Because as prophets we must do more than just find our own cliff to drive others off of before we are driven off ourselves. **We can break the cycle of public vengeance and poverty making vitriol – Jesus has.**

It’s a bold claim – I’m talking you and me, not superwomen and supermen, but just us – with our piles of undone laundry and our half-finished new year’s resolutions and our half starts. How can we be prophets? Just us?

Here’s a start, out of our three passages of scripture today: we can trade anxiety for urgency, cynicism for lament, and fear for joy. Resist anxiety, cynicism, and fear and to claim urgency, lament, and joy. As the world’s birth right, and our story.

First, to trade in anxiety that old imposter for urgency.

Jesus gets as far as the door of the synagogue and I sort of see him shaking hands as folk are going out– standing at the door, and the conversation heads south quickly.

Because the people are talking through what they have heard and seen. And waiting for Jesus to bless them with some of the acts of power and wonder he has done elsewhere: as Jesus said, ‘truly... you will say to me, ‘Do here in your hometown the things we have heard you did in Capernaum.’ And he does not. It is not just that they are annoyed with him because he hasn’t given them treats, but that they are truly anxious for the future. There are people here in need: what good is our Gospel if it leaves them behind?

I want to step aside for a moment – to say there has always been a tension, an elephant in the room for me about Jesus’ acts of healing. Not whether they are true or not – I am untroubled by that - but why he healed some and not others. Were not all the folk clustered at the pool worthy of healing? Why did he just touch the one? And what about the blind beggars who didn’t manage to yell loud enough to be heard? What about the daughters who died without a father to beg for them?

Here is the thing: we are to be urgent beyond measure for healing, for the new world – because God is urgent for them. But not anxious, not hoarding. Be not afraid, we hear in scripture. Who by worry can add one hour to her life, to paraphrase. These things are not suggestions, but commands.

Anxiety in a community tends to divide, to counsel competition for resources, to breed defensiveness - whether that is about benefits systems or border policy. Anxiety is real, and is not to be condemned, but it is not our friend in encountering those whose persons or views may do us harm.

Urgency about a situation is something different – it begins with telling truth to power and naming harm being done. Folk are sleeping rough, today. We should be urgent for this. Do we think our God is complacent? No. Should we be? No. See how God called Jeremiah? God is calling us too – pluck up a system where more folk lose homes – build ways for us to keep in them.

I think part of our prophetic task is to model a non-anxious, yet urgent presence in our institutions, in our work place, in our families, in our church and in our political engagement. This is deeply scriptural – linked to Jeremiah’s ministry and the way of love Paul recommended to the church in Corinth.

The folk in Jesus’ hometown were anxious, and I begin to see why Jesus got driven out. Note it was a real cliff they wanted to throw him off, not some metaphorical hinterland of passive aggressive snubbing, or snide comments, but a cliff with sharp rocks to break his bones and end his voice.

SO in an age that needs prophets, the first point about how to be one is be urgent, but not anxious.

Second, resist cynicism, and replace it with lament.

This is an interesting pair, cynicism and lament. I'm not so much saying they are opposites, as that doing lament well allows us to resist cynicism.

We all made it here today – but I know we are tired. I am tired. And if we are tired, how much more so the folk we deal with every day? Every bus driver, every cleaner, every person answering a phone in a call centre, every teacher or social worker or nurse putting it together to get to work tomorrow morning. And if we are truthful, we have probably been disappointed more than once in our institutions, in individuals, or in outcomes where good words were said and nothing seemed to change.

Cynicism, that great tempter, in the face of disappointment, withdraws me from engagement, from encounter. Cynicism would counsel to expect little and risk less the next time, especially when dealing with those with whom I disagree. Cynicism lets us have a whinge, but leaves us there in a self-referential loop of complaint. Lament, on the other hand, does allow us to do more than whinge – when we lament, we tell the truth about wounds, and name a difficult situation in public and together.

Lament refuses to allow grief about a particular situation, let's say rising knife crime, to be silenced where that is part of a systemic, or institutional problem. Lament allows for more than individual accountability, while holding individuals to account. Lament allows a person with an individual problem to be part of a whole solution – not to be alone.

This is deeply linked to our reflections last week about the ethics of memory, and the way Jesus used the deep memory of his people to offer freedom. Not a straightjacket, but freedom.

As we lament we have power to speak of a future that will be different from the past. Urgency for anxiety, lament for cynicism, and finally – I hope we remember this is all supposed to be joyful.

How to be a prophet? Trade fear for joy.

Miranda Threlfall-Holmes and Mark Newitt wrote a few years ago, about one mode of church response to this anxious time in which we live.

There is in many quarters of the Church a siege mentality – a sense that the world is becoming a dangerously secular place and that the response of the churches must be to nail their colours to their masts and fight.

I am all for taking responsibility for speaking God's truth, but not in the mode of "nailing our colours to the mast and fighting." I think we can do better than that, we can do better than just joining the fray of shrill voices and trying to shout louder than the rest.

We can help the wider church have models of strong, confident Christian prophetic ministry that do something more durable than nailing colours to the proverbial mast and winning the fight. (A fight for whom, against whom?)

Remember the scriptural promise we have out of Romans 8 is that we will be more than conquerors – any fool with an army or can be a conqueror – our prophetic task is something more durable than victory. Something more than driving our own hometown bad boys over the nearest cliff.

And the antidote to fear? Joy. – which begins in remembering God’s love for us. Meditating on God’s seeking us – remembering us – building and planting in us. Joy we can study, we can build, we can share. Again, a command, and deeply scriptural.

Urgency for anxiety, lament for cynicism, joy for fear: how to be a prophet. It is our responsibility to speak truth sometimes before we quite understand ourselves what it is, before it has unfolded – and in the full knowledge of the ambiguous position we stand in, as representatives of traditions that have not always been bringers of light and life. But also are.

We need prophets. I think churches and other places of worship are far more important to the health of our public culture than we realise. They are places of encounter, of growth, whose internal conflicts over theology, culture, and diversity mirror, in concentrated form, the conflicts of our day. Where we are silent, other voices will speak in our institutions, and in the public spheres they inhabit.

Jesus said, ‘no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.’

Which rather makes me glad we here – prophets – are gathered from so many different hometowns. Look at yourselves, and give thanks to God. Maybe where one of us has no chance, we, diverse as we are, are the only chance. Maybe my hometown has to speak to yours, and yours to mine.

Resist anxiety! Resist cynicism! Resist fear. Claim urgency, claim lament, claim joy.

I hope you will feel bold to continue, especially as this offers a mature and durable model of prophetic ministry to our wider church. Thank you.