

17th November 2019

Preacher: Steven Cooper

Hymns: **106** **God, whose almighty word**
 736 **In heavenly love abiding**
 155 **Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire**
 611 **Brother, sister, let me serve you**
 503 **Love divine, all loves excelling**

Readings: **Isaiah 65:17-25**
 Isaiah 12:2-6 (canticle)
 Luke 21:5-19

“Prophetic imagination”

Come, Holy Ghost (for moved by thee the prophets wrote and spoke), unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book.

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

‘For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.’

Our readings this morning remind me of my wedding.

Now, *Blimey*, you might be thinking... *what kind of a wedding did he have?* ‘There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues...’

Well, it’s nothing like that. Ruth and I got married seven and a half years ago, not far from here as it happens, at Hinde Street. Some of you who are local to this area will be familiar with it. And for a wedding present, my godfather, the late Revd Geoff Cornell, gave us a theological book: and it’s called *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann. In it, he writes: “For Steven and Ruth.” (At the time I was preparing to begin training as a minister in the Methodist Church...) “One a prospective minister, and needs to know about prophets; the other a financial journalist,” (that was Ruth) “and needs to know about profits. Both need imagination in their work — and the themes of grief and hope with which this book deals are pertinent to both spheres.”

‘Prophetic imagination’ is what I want to reflect on today as being of profound importance to understanding our scriptures, and indeed of profound importance to our time. It’s what this book by Walter Brueggemann—one of my theological heroes—is all about.

Imagination. Culture, at least in much of the West, encourages imagination as something to be fostered and celebrated among children, but among adults it tends to present imagination in rather disparaging terms as something at best a bit twee and fanciful: often using phrases like ‘pie in the sky’ or ‘you’re living in cloud cuckoo land’. The effect of this—and this is the concern with which Brueggemann is concerned—is to limit vision: to limit vision for the possibility of things being different, and so to prevent—or at least, often to try to prevent—change from actually taking place. Imagination is at the heart of creating the possibility for things to be different; because it is only by imagining how things might be, that the circumstances begin to fall into place for things actually to come to be that way.

This is something we see in our politics—this business of often trying to quench imagination in order to prevent change, to preserve the status quo—and not least around the time of election campaigns such as we are, in this country, witnessing at present. Someone presents a bold and imaginative idea for how something may be done differently, and the all-too-easy response from the other side is simply to ridicule it as ‘ludicrous’, ‘inconceivable’: lest such a change be allowed to happen, with all the vested interests—be they of wealth, or of political power—that stand to be challenged were such a vision to be accepted. Without taking sides, we can say that we can even see such dynamics at play in the pages of our newspapers around the election campaign this past week.

One of the most insidious ways in which those who hold power seek to maintain that power, and stem the possibility of change to the status quo, is by the limiting, the discouragement, the ridiculing of imagination.

And this is what the prophets—not least the prophet Isaiah whose words we have heard this morning—are responding to. And indeed the same goes for all true prophets, and I would say, if we are being true to our calling, that I would include you and me in that. In Brueggemann’s words, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” So the deliberate act, the positive act of imagining the picture of how God would have things be—as Isaiah does in his words that we have heard today—helps to create the possibility of things actually coming to be that way.

In Isaiah’s context, at this stage of the book of Isaiah, the writer is speaking from a situation of being in exile, in Babylon; and of his home, Jerusalem and the surrounding area having been decimated of its own culture, its way of life: a sense of despair is all that remains there at this time. And yet, in response to that despair, Isaiah speaks these incredible words of hope: paints this remarkable picture of a vision of total transformation of how things presently are—even going so far as to say, ‘The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox’... a radical, imaginative vision of how things may be different, in the eyes of God. And

Isaiah's concern, in presenting that imaginative vision, is to *help God* create the possibility of that change actually coming to be.

Sometimes when we read the words of the prophets, they strike us as dramatic, and hard-hitting, and sometimes they strike us as simply, in a sense, words to kind of beat over the head those who are obstinate or unwilling to see things differently. Walter Brueggemann expands on this by saying that, "Prophetic faith in a flat, confrontational mode, without imagination is a non-starter." He also says, "It is important to see that the prophetic texts [of scripture] that feature [in his words] the great confrontations"—by which, he means confronting the status quo with a radically different vision—"are not to be directly replicated and re-enacted. Rather, they are to be seen as materials that might fund the would-be prophetic voice,"—that voice of you and me—"to give wisdom and courage, but which then invite immense imagination to know how to move from such texts to actual circumstance."

Our calling, therefore, is to recognise the hope that we have in God, and imaginatively, prophetically to bear witness to that, in the context of the world we inhabit, as it is.

And this is not in any sense about 'pie in the sky'—certainly not 'pie in the sky when you die', to use that phrase: it's about the world we inhabit here and now. And nothing makes that clearer than the words that we heard from Luke's gospel. Jesus makes no bones about the fact that the world as it is is a place in which there is a lot that is messed up: "When you hear of wars and insurrections," he says though, "do not be terrified" ... "there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues... there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." But, he says, "This will give you an opportunity to testify."—To testify to the hope, to the vision that you have; in the knowledge that in God, something else is indeed possible. This business of prophetic imagination, of prophetic witness to a different way that things can be, is not something divorced from the present state of the world we're in. It's not about looking forward to the horizon beyond our present life, in some distant place in the future: it's about bearing witness to the hope, to the vision that we have, in the here-and-now.

God entered into the very life of that mess, that trauma in human society in the here-and-now, in taking on the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. So let us not ever be under any illusion that our task is somehow divorced from our present age. We are called to be imaginative, to bear witness to the hope that we have: the hope that we have in a God who raised Jesus from the dead, in whom all things are possible.

And the importance of imagination, it cuts more than one way: it's not just about imagining that which is beyond how things are at the moment. This week I went to see a film by Ken Loach called *Sorry We Missed You*. It's in cinemas at the moment; and it's in many ways a fairly straightforward film, that paints a picture simply of what life is like for some members of our own British society at present. It

deals with the situation of a family, the father within which works for a parcel delivery company; and he has an incredibly stressful job, in which the conditions of his employment are wholly unsympathetic to the demands that sometimes fall upon his family life, and in which it is very difficult to get ahead in a way that is anything other than quite depressing and constantly difficult.

And yet the truth is, watching this film, what struck me was actually there was nothing in it that I found especially surprising or shocking—because it was simply portraying life as, for many people, it is; and certainly in ministry I've seen all the kinds of things that are portrayed on that screen. And I was wondering therefore, well, what really is the point of this film? And actually the point, of course, is that in fact there are some within our society, within our communities who cannot or will not or, for whatever reason, do not imagine what life is like for others within our own neighbourhoods. Imagination matters.

What's my imagination? Well, back when I was a student, in the Methodist Society at university we had a chat one time where we were invited to consider: What's your vision for how things might be, in the world? And I came up with an idea, that maybe in the future there will be no such thing as trade. I was perhaps inspired at that time by watching *Star Trek*, where often, if people need food, they just go to their materializer machine and it just appears. In *Star Trek*, you never actually see anyone buying anything—I don't know if you've ever noticed that, and Trekkies among you? But I actually thought: gosh, that's actually quite a thought-provoking idea: that maybe in the future there will be no trade, because all that people need will be available for them; people won't be in competition with one another; no one will have to acquire anything that they need at someone else's expense.

Now, "You naïve fool," you might say, for having such a vision. And yet, let us not be limited in what our imagination can offer; because—I go back to this prophetic idea—that however extraordinary the vision might be, it is only ever by the imagination of something that *is not yet* that the possibility begins to come into view that it might yet be.

And perhaps, more than anything, what can encourage us and at the same time humble us is the recognition that whatever we might imagine, however extraordinary our vision might be, our imagination is but a pale reflection of the imagination of God. We cannot imagine as God does. And what we can also recognise is that, come what may—really, irrespective of whether we play along or not—God's imagination will prevail. In God, all things *are* possible; but our prophetic calling is nonetheless to join in partnership with God in this business of prophetic imagination. The need is urgent, and we are called to lend our imagination to that of God. None of us can change the world alone, but collectively—by our imaginative vision—we share with God in making real the possibility of a world in which real justice, real peace, and the flourishing of all are found. Amen.