

Sermon - prophetic faith

Based on the readings: Ezekiel 2.1–10; 2 Corinthians 12.2–10; Mark 6.1–13

Prophets and prophecy

- Today's readings from Ezekiel, 2 Corinthians, and the first part of the Gospel passage all focus on prophets.
- Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus are not exclusively prophets - rather it is only part of their wider calling or role: Ezekiel was a priest, Paul was a missionary, and Jesus was a rabbi - a teacher.
- It is good for us to remember that prophecy is not about making accurate predictions of future events, otherwise prophets would tend to become quite rich.
- Prophecy is about discerning God's word for the current time, and place, and people - it is about understanding and sharing God's perspective of whatever the current situation is.
- The reason why prophecy is sometimes confused with predicting the future, is that when the word of God addresses people who are wilfully following their own way rather than God's way, quite often the inevitable consequences are spelled out.
- As in: 'If you keep behaving selfishly, greedily, pridefully, and so on, then you'll suffer the consequences' - and the kind of consequences might then be described.
- Alongside the negative consequences there is often a counterpart described: 'But if you repent and turn back to walking in the way of the Lord, and practicing sacrificial love, then you'll benefit from the consequence of the blessings God gives.'
- Inevitably, when people hear a prophet's warnings, they regard the prophet as someone who is fixated on being critical, negative, and a nay-sayer, and they usually aren't interested in engaging with the word of the Lord when it makes them uncomfortable.
- People tend to react, and say things like: 'Go away - you're making us uncomfortable and unhappy. Go and bother someone else.'
- Except they tend to say these things less politely, and a bit more forcefully, and maybe make their point with sticks and stones.

A prophet without honour

- It is in this role of being a prophet that Jesus arrives back at his home town of Nazareth, although his prophetic vision is usually of good news - that God's kingdom has arrived.
- Actually, he seems to be acting more in the role of teacher and healer, but refers to himself as a prophet.
- It appears that Jesus understood his teaching to be more than just instruction, and to effectively be speaking God's word into that situation as well.
- Likewise his healings were more than just restorations of health and social well-being, and were effectively enactments of God's blessing into those situations as well.
- For Jesus, proclaiming that the kingdom of God had come near, and enacting that kingdom, was to prophecy - to be a practical, hands-on, manifester-of-God's-word prophet rather than just a verbal listen-to-me prophet.
- And so Jesus, as a prophet in his home town, finds that there is a wall of doubt and dismissal.

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- The community effectively says: ‘Who does this fellow think he is, coming with all this wisdom and these deeds of power?’
- ‘After all, we know who he is. He’s nothing special. He’s just a carpenter. We know his family. They’re just ordinary people like us.’
- It’s as if they are determined not to see God’s Spirit at work in him.
- Even when they name the wisdom and the power, it’s as if they cannot even acknowledge the real meaning of what they name.
- They are using these words accurately, but they seem to have lost the connection to the meaning.
- If someone challenged them and pointed out the words they were using, they would probably reply: ‘They’re just words. They don’t mean anything.’
- When people are wilfully following their own way of thinking and their own way of seeing, then they are blind and deaf to God.
- God describes such people to Ezekiel:
the people of Israel [are] a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn’ (Ezekiel 2.3-4)

The effect of faith, or not, in God

- There is another aspect to this story, which has to do with faith.
- Once again, as I have done over the last few Sundays, it is helpful to have a very brief summary of Mark’s narrative up to this point.
- Time and again in the preceding chapters, Jesus demonstrates his authority over chaos and disorder, over the demonic and over life-draining forces.
- Alongside that, Jesus also teaches and encourages people in their faith.
- He describes those who enact God’s will through their faith relationship with God, as being members of his spiritual family and members of the new kingdom of God that is being established.
- Jesus tells parables about sowing and growing faith, and working faithfully with God.
- He calms a storm on the lake and chides the disciples for their lack of faith displayed through their fear and anxiety.
- Last Sunday we heard of the woman who had been haemorrhaging for twelve years who was healed through her faith in Jesus’ power.
- And we heard of the synagogue leader named Jairus, who had faith in Jesus to heal his sick daughter, and was encouraged to stay faithful even after his daughter had died before Jesus had arrived at his home.
- The woman and Jairus had been steadfast in recognising and acknowledging God’s power at work in and through Jesus, and consequently Jesus was able to respond, and enact that power.
- So the first part of today’s Gospel story provides a direct contrast to these stories of faith:

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- when people refuse to work with God, and deny God's power and presence, then God does not force himself on them when they do not want God's blessing.
- I'm sure that if you were to ask those people of Nazareth: 'Don't you want God's blessing?', they would respond: 'Of yes, of course we do. But *this* isn't God blessing us. After all, we know that God would not bless us through a carpenter, through someone whose family we know, someone who we know is not qualified to bless us, despite appearances.'
- This still applies to people today.
- When we decide that we know where God is and isn't at work, and who God is or is not working through, instead of growing and deepening our own faith relationship with God, then God stops blessing us.
- Or more accurately, where God *is* at work, and where God *is* continuing to bless us, is just not apparent.
- And when God sends prophets among us to speak and enact God's word into our current situation, we find reasons to deny that such prophets are indeed prophets.
- One of the symptoms of such situations, is that words can lose meaning and value.

Stepping out in faith

- Nevertheless, the Gospel story does not stop there.
- If we look at the second half of the Gospel passage we hear of Jesus sending out the first disciples to continue and further his prophetic ministry.
- The amazing thing is that they go!
- And they proclaim repentance - that is, for people to turn from their own self-centred ways to God's way of sacrificial love.
- And they enact God's power over demonic forces, and deliver people from the things that drain life.
- And they restore people to wholeness and well-being.
- This is astounding!
- These are the disciples that Jesus had previously been chiding for their lack of faith, and now their faith has developed so that they find themselves working with God to make God's kingdom manifest - to make it a tangible reality.
- One of the key aspects that Jesus insists on is for them to submit themselves to the risk of hospitality.
- That is, they are not to provide for themselves - they are not to depend on their own means.
- Rather, they are to depend on God's provision through others.
- Jesus let's them know that this will not always come through for them, when they encounter people and communities who are not aligned with God's way.
- Nevertheless, this is a fundamental part of a living faith relationship with God - practising one's dependence on God.

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Dependence on God

- This is exactly what Paul describes in his own faith relationship.
- He quotes his own discernment of what the Lord told him:
'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Corinthians 12.9)
- And he continues:
So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12.9-10)
- Paul knows that he is intelligent, educated, strong-willed, a gifted speaker, and resourceful.
- But he also has come to see that if he is too dependent on his own abilities, then his faith dependence on God diminishes, and God's ability or desire to act through Paul also diminishes.
- So Paul understands that the more he depends on God through his faith relationship with God, the more that God will be able to achieve through him.
- Just as God does with the disciples when Jesus sends them out.

Be encouraged in faith, together

- There are a variety of perspectives on what God is saying to each of us individually through his word today.
- In addition, I believe that God is also encouraging us as a faith community together:
- Have faith - be faithful - grow in faith.
- Remember that faith is not about believing in the existence of God, but about believing in God.
- Believing in God is about having a faith relationship with God.
- The people of Nazareth were not practising a faith relationship with God, and so God's Spirit could not be effective amongst them.
- Whereas the disciples, and later Paul, were dependent on their faith relationship with God, and so God's Spirit could be effective in their lives.
- Likewise, when we intentionally grow in our faith relationship with God - both as individuals and as a community, - and depend on God, then we make ourselves open to God's Spirit being effective in and through our church community of St John's.
- When we make ourselves vulnerable to God's hospitality, then God makes his blessings tangible, and his kingdom is made manifest.

The Lord be with you.