

***“For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?” (Jeremiah 23.18)***

A prophet, at least as the term is used in the Bible, is one who comes speaking God’s truth, one who has been sent by God with a message. Some prophecy speaks to future events, but more often than not, God’s prophets come with a message for right now, a message that requires immediate action in response. The challenge that faces the hearer of prophecy, according to today’s readings, is how to rightly discern whether the message comes from God, and to do so in a timely fashion. At first glance, this is where the Scriptures place us, as hearers of the Word.

In speaking to us as hearers, Jeremiah and Matthew affirm several key truths: first, that false prophets – or those who speak an urgent message that does **not** come from God – exist, and they always have. It is assumed in both these passages that there will be those who bear a message counter to God’s truth. Second, that false prophecy tends to be hopeful, and comfortable to the listener. As Jeremiah says, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, **filling you with vain hopes**... They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you’”. It should be noted that all around this passage, Jeremiah is prophesying judgement upon wrongdoers, not easy salvation.

Coming out of that then, the third truth Jeremiah and Matthew give us is that true prophecy carries some note of judgement. Anyone sent by God will try to lead their hearers back to God, which usually requires some sort of change of heart. And fourth then, false prophets will be judged for leading others astray. Those who have been led astray have some measure of grace—in Jeremiah’s prophecy, the harshest judgement falls on the leaders of the people (who are false prophets in their own way)—but ultimately they are still in some way liable for their separation from God.

It’s easy to stop here, to assume that we are all in the position of hearers, to nod in agreement with Jeremiah as he declares God’s wrath upon false prophets and unfaithful leaders, and to gird up our loins to stand up against those Jesus declares he will not acknowledge in the Kingdom. However, I want you to consider what it means to be called to be a Christian, part of the priestly people of God. A priest is one who is called out of the people to stand before God on the people’s behalf and to speak God’s truth back to the people. A priestly nation, such as Israel, such as the Church, is a nation called out of the world to stand before God on the world’s behalf, and to bring the word of God back to the nations. As a priestly people then, we are automatically in danger of being those against whom our Scriptural Word is spoken today! Each of us—and the Church collectively—has the potential to become a false prophet if we don’t spend time with God discerning truth and acting on that truth. After all, Jeremiah and Matthew both tell us that it’s hard to tell the difference between true and false prophets without taking the time to look carefully.

Jeremiah’s focus on prophets and leaders suggests that we, as priests and leaders among the nations, can and will be judged for the harm we cause others to do in God’s name. So how can we be sure that **we** speak truth?

First, faith is active. Both Paul in Romans and Jesus in Matthew tell us to be aware of *how* we act and speak—are our deeds of the flesh, or of the Spirit? Do our lives show evidence of spiritual fruit? Or fruits of the flesh? Faith is not transactional, as in, if you act correctly then you will be saved, but it is transformational. Real faith produces discernable results; it’s not a magical change—it comes at God’s behest and through God’s power, but it does require us to be receptive and responsive to God’s movement in our lives.

As a transformational experience, faith is by its very nature uncomfortable. Things rub and chafe, grow and shrink, and even more dramatically, as Paul says we are ultimately called to put to death things that don’t belong to God to make room for Godly growth. As human beings living in the world, to be called out of the world means maximum discomfort, even so far as to be called suffering. I’d like to suggest that if you’re feeling comfortable in the world, and if nothing you hear in church or read in Scripture makes you uncomfortable, you’re probably not living in the Spirit. As I said before, true prophecy carries a note of judgement. There’s always something more to put to death, some new limb to grow. But again, this requires constant discernment; we are called to seek God, to spend time in God’s presence to know the truth, and to recognize those things about ourselves and our circumstances that require healing and those things that need to be put to death.

One last thing I feel our readings lead us to in this discussion of prophets and judgement is the sense that sin is communal. Yes, we each commit individual trespasses against God and against other people, and those are important, but the fact that both Jeremiah and Jesus speak specifically against those who lead and

those who have influence over others suggests that we need to put our social systems and community dynamics to the same scrutiny we use in personal interaction.

Sin, separation from God, includes those systems we perpetuate that cause harm to other people; to neglect reflection on our life at a communal level is to prophesy falsely to our neighbours that everything is okay, the status quo is sanctioned and even sanctified, even though we can clearly see that we live in the midst of very broken systems. The only way we move forward is to point out those places of brokenness and hurt, to proclaim that God will judge them, and all those involved in perpetuating them, so that the poor and oppressed may find justice.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, showed us just how wrong our church and our society has gone with regards to how we treat our indigenous kindred. It showed us that there are still elements of our social structures that actively harm indigenous people and communities. It also showed us that the healing process begins with acknowledging the wound. There are so many more examples than this, but I think the TRC is a good place to start because it caused the church, especially the Anglican Church to take a good long look at how it has been led – and allowed itself to be led – by false prophets.

I know this is a pretty heavy place to end up, but I actually feel this is good news. Judgement is harsh when it's coming your way, and I think that I, for one, as a white middle class woman, probably have a bit to be concerned about in terms of the privilege I carry and haven't always used well. But judgement is a really good thing for those who have experienced and are experiencing oppression and violence. I think part of the Christian calling is to recognize those places where we need to accept judgement for the sake of raising up others.

Furthermore, I want to emphasize that while what we read from Romans today is pretty difficult to hear and process—putting to death any part of one's being, especially if it's a part that doesn't seem *too* bad, is necessarily painful—the rest of Romans 8 is about as joyful as it gets. The chapter begins, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" and then later in this chapter we get Paul's famous declaration that nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. After all, who is the fulfillment of the law and prophets but Christ Jesus? The good news is that God's judgement has come, and continues to come upon the world and that judgement is the cross and the transformation of the tomb. It is not only possible for the world to change, it is happening, and we are invited to take part in God's saving action in the world.

We do this by praying, worshipping together in Church, and sharing God's word and work with others. St. Francis of Assisi is often credited as saying, "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words." While he probably didn't actually say that, the statement is a good one to get us thinking about our lives as a holistic testament to God. Everything we do and say—the fruits we bear—speak to others about what we believe, about what's important to us.

In a more modern sense, philosopher and theologian James T. Smith says that "You are what you love," by which he means that our habits both shape how we think and are shaped by what we see as truly important. If we spend time with God, we will come to understand how God sees the world, and we will learn to recognize God's truth and our speech and actions will be shaped by that time spent in God's company. By doing "good works", which may include volunteering, donating goods and money, or even spending time listening to those in need of comfort, our hearts and minds will be shaped and molded toward God's image.

Amidst all of this, I especially encourage each one of you to also engage in prayerful self-reflection—why do I do what I do? How have I helped God today? How have I hindered God? What do I believe and why? And, how do my beliefs inform my actions? Don't shy away from mistakes made, for mistakes point to parts of our lives that need to be put to death and renewed through the power of the Spirit.

Through these three means—prayer and worship, charitable acts, and self-reflection—we can participate in what God is doing in the world, and we can more closely align our own preaching (with or without words) with God's own truth. Not every one of us is called to be a big-P prophet, one who speaks a specific message from God in a specific time and place, but we are each called to be prophetic in our lives, pointing others to God in all we say and do. And as we spend time with God individually, we grow collectively into a more prayerful people, which enables us to work with God at a societal level to address the injustices that we have allowed to fester. And we trust and believe in God's promise that, as Jeremiah says just prior to our passage today, "the days are coming ... when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and **he** shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely."