

**2 July 2017**

**Welcoming the prophet**

**Jeremiah 28.5-9**

**Matthew 10.40-42**

About every six to eight weeks the ministers from the Baptist churches around the borough of Barnet get together for a lunch. We don't have any fixed agenda to our meeting. We meet to keep in touch, to share news, and to support one another. The whole thing is very informal, with plenty of laughter. And our conversation can take us in all sorts of directions.

A few months ago we got onto the subject of the Labour party leadership. How we got there, I can't remember ... but it was at a time when Jeremy Corbyn was under considerable pressure from the parliamentary party, and at a time when his popular profile was at a very low ebb.

A number of us commented how Jeremy Corbyn had always been something of a rebel within the Labour party – taking up minority causes, being something of a thorn in the flesh of the leadership ... and how difficult it is for a rebel to become a leader. If you have spent your whole life on the edge of things, stirring things up, you have to learn a whole new set of skills to become the person who is now in the centre of things, whose task it is to take people along with you.

The discussion then took something of a theological turn – I suppose that's inevitable when you have a bunch of ministers talking. And we began exploring the question of whether it is ever possible for a prophet also to be the pastor of a congregation. How easy is it for a prophet to be a leader of a congregation?

We were thinking of the prophet as the person who stirs things up, who sometimes has difficult things to say, who provokes people in their relationship with God, and challenges people about what it means to be centred on God.

Will the prophet always be on the edge of things? Or is it possible for Christian leadership to be both prophetic and pastoral?

Prophets, after all, often have uncomfortable things to say.

Prophets often divide opinion.

The pastor, on the other hand, will often want to offer people reassurance.

The pastor will want to be a focus for unity within the congregation, to bring people together.

So is it possible to be both prophetic and pastoral?

Now that is an interesting question. And I think the answer to that question in part depends upon the qualities of the minister in question – about whether they are able to hold these two callings together in a dynamic tension when required.

But it also, in part, depends upon the qualities of the congregation. Is the congregation willing to recognise and welcome the voice of the prophet, when the prophet speaks?

The effectiveness of the prophetic voice depends upon the receptiveness of the hearers.

In chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel Jesus has been giving instructions to his disciples as he sent them out to preach the good news of the kingdom and to demonstrate the presence of the kingdom through healing the sick.

In his instructions Jesus makes it clear that this is a high calling, and that it is a demanding calling. 'You may find yourselves in the midst of family conflicts because of me. You may face persecution.'

'But don't be afraid because even the very hairs of your head are numbered.'

Having given instructions to those he sent, he then also addressed those who would be receiving them in the towns and cities to which they were to travel:

"He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."

The disciples are seen as ambassadors who are sent with all of the authority of the one who sent them – Jesus. So that when people welcome them and receive them, they are welcoming and receiving Jesus himself.

But this chain of representation has another link in it. Because Jesus himself was sent by the Father, so in welcoming Jesus they are actually welcoming the Father himself.

Jesus wants to bring out the full significance of this in talking about the cup of water offered to one of 'these little ones'. Because of who these little ones represent as disciples of Jesus, this simple gesture of hospitality and welcome takes on huge significance. 'Anyone who does this will not lose their reward.'

But in the middle of all of this Jesus mentions the prophet as well:

"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward."

Not everyone is called to be a prophet (whatever we think a prophet may be) ... this is a calling of only a few ...

... but it is the responsibility of all of us to be ready to receive and welcome the prophet when the prophet speaks among us.

So how do we recognise the voice of the prophet among us?

What do I mean when I talk about a prophet?

I am not talking about someone who predicts the future. I am talking about someone who speaks God's word of challenge and hope to a particular time and context.

- someone who sees how God's purposes are unfolding at the particular time
- someone who sees where God is at work in the world and in the church, and what it would mean to be partners with God
- someone who speaks for God's justice in the world

How do we recognise the voice of the prophet?

We can look at the story in Jeremiah to help us, but when we do, we will see that there are no easy answers to this question.

The passage we read comes in the middle of a showdown in the temple between the prophet Hananiah and the prophet Jeremiah.

Just a few years earlier, in 598BC, Judah had been invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The king and his officials had been taken into exile and the treasures had been taken from the temple.

The prophet Jeremiah had been claiming that all of this was the hand of God at work, because of Judah's unfaithfulness to God. His message was that the people of Israel had better get used to this because they were going to be under the yoke of Babylon for many years to come.

But then a rival prophet, Hananiah comes on the scene. Like Jeremiah he begins his proclamations with the statement, 'Thus says the Lord'.

Ironically Hananiah's name means 'God is gracious' – and his message to the people is altogether more optimistic. 'This is what God says - I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two

years our king will be back on his throne, the treasures will be returned to the temple!’

Jeremiah is a glass half empty kind of person – that’s not how he sees the world ... and he believes that he is in the line of Israel’s prophets who threatened God’s judgment on God’s people for their lack of faithfulness.

“The prophet who prophesies peace will be recognised as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.”

Jeremiah has consistently denounced those prophets who proclaim “Peace, peace where there is no peace.”

Now it is very easy looking back on this story and saying, ‘Of course, Jeremiah is right. Hananiah was simply telling people what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah had truly understood God’s ways.’

But we are making that judgment because we know that Jeremiah was right about the exile – in the short term things actually got worse rather than better for the people of Judah. The whole city of Jerusalem together with its temple was destroyed and a large proportion of the population was taken away into exile, which lasted for 70 years.

But at the time, Hananiah’s claims would have sounded extremely credible. His words of assurance were based upon the promises that had sustained the people of Israel over the centuries – that God had called the people of Israel to be his own, that he had appointed David and his successors as kings, and that he would protect Jerusalem. And in the past God had always come good on his promises.

What Hananiah was saying to the people of Jerusalem now, had close echoes of the message that the prophet Isaiah had brought to the people of Jerusalem under the reign of Hezekiah just over 100

years earlier. At that time the city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrians and God saved Jerusalem against all the odds.

So why shouldn't the good and gracious God do it again?

Now it wasn't that Hananiah believed God to be a God of love, and Jeremiah believed God to be a God of vengeance. It was that they both had very different ideas about how God expressed his love.

Jeremiah believed that Hananiah's idea of God's love amounted to the kind of love that a spoiled brat demands of their parents ... always giving in to their demands come what may.

Jeremiah believed in God's love for his people ... but he respected that love as a 'tough love' that allows people to discover the consequences of rebellion and disobedience ... but a love that remains there to restore and redeem.

If it was difficult for Jeremiah to speak this uncomfortable and unwelcome word to his people, it would also have been difficult for the people to recognise this as the true word of God – they needed to share the same kind of insight and sensitivity to the Spirit of God that Jeremiah himself had.

We are called to welcome the prophet – but prophet don't come with some kind of divine 'kite mark' emblazoned on their foreheads – welcoming the prophet takes the same kind of prophetic insight as the prophet herself displays.

It means keeping ourselves alert to what the Spirit of God is saying to us through the voices of others.

- the prophetic voice often comes from the edge and from the margins
- the prophetic voice will always have a concern for justice – often speaking for the poor and the marginalized

- the prophetic voice will often be the uncomfortable voice

Making sure that we give voice to all within the church.

The two church traditions which have formed this church, both find their roots in churches which have practiced a congregational form of church government – the major decisions in the church are taken by all of the members together discerning the mind of Christ.

Now at its worst this is a Christian form of democracy in which the votes of the majority determine the direction the church takes.

At its very best, this is a way of listening to God in which we are determined to listen to everyone's voice, because at any one time any individual among us may be speaking God's prophetic word to us.

Church meetings work best when they are not viewed as the right for everyone to have their say, but as the responsibility of everyone to listen. God sometimes speaks to us from people on the margins, from the minority voice ... and so we will ensure that we will listen.

We will want to bring the marginal voices into the centre.

I took over chairing the group that helped to develop safeguarding policy in the Baptist Union. In the early years a member of Baptist Union Council had been something of a bugbear. Always criticising, always bringing up objections, making life difficult.

I hadn't been directly involved in any of this. I determined when I took over to meet with this person and discovered that she was highly informed and experienced in this area. We therefore decided to include her in our planning group so that her particular point of view was embraced by the way in which we developed policy in the future. It probably made making decisions slightly more difficult, but the decisions were then more broadly accepted.

It wasn't about silencing her, but about validating her views and respecting her insights.