

Hymns: **171** **“Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes”**
 162 **“The prophets’ voice comes down the years”**
 591 **“Let all mortal flesh keep silence”**
 185 **“O come, O come Emmanuel”**

Readings: **Baruch 5:1-9**
 Luke 3:1-6

“THE PROPHETS”

I went to the barbers yesterday. I sat waiting my turn and, innocently, listened to the man ahead of me in the queue as he gave his instructions. They went something like this: “I have curly hair. I like my curls. I want to keep them. But the hair below the curls can go. But not too much. Just so. You see, my partner likes my curly look. You can give me a straight trim at the back of my neck. But don’t touch the curls.”

When the barber had finished with him, he went out looking like a post-modern flower arrangement.

My head was full of this morning’s sermon as I sat there. This little exchange helped me to understand one important aspect of the prophet’s role. He has to speak in a way that can be understood. And he has to have a clear idea of what he wants to say.

In the old days, a prophet was always somebody with his finger on the pulse of the people he was speaking to. He knew them. He understood them. And he was able to articulate their needs. They recognised in what he was saying the hopes and fears that were lodged stubbornly in their breasts.

But the prophet was also someone with an ear open for God’s word. He knew God. He understood God. And the relationship between the prophet and his Maker allowed him to articulate what the will of God might be in any given situation.

So when the prophet said (as he often is reported to have done): “thus saith the Lord...” – he was about to make a declaration of the mind of God and, at the same time, frame this declaration in a way that resonated with the people. It was a pure act of clear communication.

I must at this point make something very clear. The prophet was never a mere soothsayer, someone who could read tealeaves or your palm. It wasn’t his job to make futile stabs at what might happen in the future. In French, it’s easy to make the distinction between someone who “sees clearly” (*voire clair*) and someone who’s a clairvoyant. My dear old mother, as part of her essential reading, would always turn to the horoscope in her beloved Daily Mirror. And she’d also buy, year after

year, a copy of Old Moore's Almanac. She'd had such a wretched past that she clung to anyone who could give her a clue about a possible better future.

We feel the need for prophets when times are at their most troubled. Just like now. They pop up in various ways when there's a breakdown of trust in the traditional ways of organising our affairs. At such times, with people on all hands so bewildered, all kinds of people rise up to claim our attention. They drop words in our ears. They claim to be authoritative in their fields. Pundits as well as prophets proliferate. The trouble is, amidst this medley of voices, you can find wrong-doers, truth-twisters, quacks and tricksters, charlatans, upstarts, and downright liars. There will inevitably be tares amongst the wheat.

I'd thought of identifying, indeed naming, those who might qualify for these varying degrees of deception and delusory talk. People in the news right now. But I've thought better of it. Instead, let me give you the "types" of such erroneous behaviour, such pretence at prophecy, that spring from the Bible itself:

- Aaron – while Moses was consulting with God at the top of the mountain, the people became fidgety. They disliked their wandering life. They began to think they'd prefer to return to the flesh-pots of Egypt. They became very disturbed and pressurised Aaron, Moses's sidekick, into finding an alternative way forward. And Aaron did just that. he got them to cough up all the gold jewellery they wore or carried. He melted it and turned it into a great idol – a golden calf. Moses was not pleased! Here was a case of someone, in the name of leadership, giving people what they wanted. That's not prophecy.
- Then there's Hananiah, a contemporary of Jeremiah. He put an alternative version to the king, distinguishing his views from those of Jeremiah. He told the king that things would be alright. He shouldn't worry too much about the forces massed at his gates. He'd win out. He curried the king's favour by telling him what he wanted to hear. That's not what a prophet does.
- Daniel – things were so awful in his time (the time of the Persian Empire) that he couldn't find any solution to the problems of the day that were likely to occur within human history. So he posited an apocalyptic future beyond history. That's not what a prophet does. His word is for here. And now.
- Baruch – you'll be surprised at hearing a reading from this book in this morning's service – it's commonly called "apocryphal". People didn't feel confident enough about it put it within the official "canon" of the Scriptures. This reading is so sunny and shiny and lovely. Whoever wrote it clearly had a tidy mind and wanted to say nice things. He played to the gallery, to all those people who liked their stories to have a successful outcome, a happy ending. The prophet is not concerned simply with happy endings.
- Bar Kokhba was a contemporary of John the Baptist. He couldn't find any way of presenting a case to his people. The Romans were a terrifying occupying power and he resented their presence greatly. So he simply stepped outside the box. He resorted to terror and guerrilla warfare. The

origins of this indirect way of fighting can be traced back to him. But that's not what prophets do.

- And then there are the people identified by Jesus – those who are full of sanctimonious words, those who say “Lord, Lord...” These are people who claim a closeness to God, who dream up beautiful solutions to human problems and claim to do it in the name of God. But their promises are frequently unrelated to action. There's a failure in the delivery. Prophets are not like this. They are like fruit trees which bear good fruit.

So these “types” of false leadership/prophecy are there at the heart of the biblical narrative. Their counterparts were less fashionable because they were so counterintuitive. They were realistic. Their words related to the real world with its ups and downs, its dark places. Let's look at them for a moment:

- Moses – the prophet who advocated the long, hard, slog as his people journeyed towards their promised land.
- Jeremiah – “dear king, you're presiding over chaos, doom lies ahead.” For his pains, they dug a hole and threw him in it. And later they put him in prison. He spoke the truth to power.
- The twelve minor prophets – they courted unpopularity, their feet were always on the ground. They told it as it was. They were hardly the most loved members of their society.
- John the Baptist – curiously clad, ascetic, out in the desert, spoke his fierce words and told a whole people of their need for repentance.
- The prophet Jesus's, thought about was the one who did “the will of the father”.

As I said, you'll all be able to put modern equivalents to these various categories of people. When I was recently researching material for a speech I was to give at our local High School I found these words of Sir Ernest Benn. They're words that have been wrongly attributed to Groucho Marx. I've changed one word but otherwise as it's exactly as I found the quotation: “Prophecy too often passes for the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it wrongly, and applying unsuitable remedies.” The word I've changed is, of course, the first one. I've substituted “prophecy” for “politics”. And perhaps, for British listeners, I should add that Sir Ernest Benn is the great-uncle of Hilary Benn who's made such an impression over this last week.

And so with great perplexity, we're left with a searing question. How do we discern who the good prophets are? How do we differentiate between the good and the false prophet? I've got a grid, a series of tick-boxes and here they are:

1. We must be persuaded that the prophet, guru, leader in front of us isn't in it for himself.

2. We must be persuaded that he's got the good will of all people in mind. It's the common good he seeks.
3. We must check ourselves out to be sure that we aren't looking for someone who'll serve our personal ends (at the expense of someone else's).
4. We'll be prepared to listen to people who are not necessarily from our social class or ethnic group or clique. God sometimes uses people "outside the box" to arrest our attention and call us to order.
5. We'll expect more than mere denunciation, yaboo-utterance, personal attacks from the true leader. Negative rhetoric is easy. True leadership is much more demanding.
6. The true prophet will have great personal courage. He (or she) will have wit, not take themselves too seriously, set a good example.
7. We'll need to trust our sixth sense. On the whole, but not always, we get a "feel" for the genuine article. John the Baptist would come out well from this kind of examination. We'll be looking at him next week.

For the moment, as we prepare to take bread and wine and to remember the Prophet who not only called us to a life of service, not only advocated the road of costly love, not only preached a message of hope in words BUT lived out that message, showed the way, embodied the values, paid the ultimate price.

The biblical verse "looking unto Jesus" is the perfect formula for determining the nature of the true prophet on a day like today, we can only thank God for all the prophets he's raised up down the years. And hope that we can hear the authentic voice with which he still speaks in our own generation.

Amen