

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
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OLD TESTAMENT BASICS (2)

THE PROPHETS

When you want to define anything the best thing is to go to the Dictionary, above all to the doyen of dictionaries, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. I have a very battered copy of the two-volume, shorter edition, in its 1933 incarnation, and this is how it defines “prophet”: *One who speaks for God or for any deity, as the inspired revealer or interpreter of his will.* As far as the prophets of the Old Testament are concerned, this puts the emphasis where it ought to be – they are not mainly to be seen as forecasters of the future (though many of them certainly express messianic hopes for the future) but rather as mediators and interpreters of the divine will for the present or pretty near future. They speak for another into the situation of their people. They are not so much foretellers as *forthtellers*, speaking God’s word and will into situations they knew and understood as members of the Jewish community of their day. So, in this talk, I’m above all interested in what the words of the prophets tell us about God, remembering, as we saw last week, that the church has always held to the conviction that the God whose spokesmen they were is none other than the God of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, our God.

But first a little bit of historical scaffolding. Prophecy had a long history in Israel, from about 1,000 BC to, let’s say, roughly 400BC – it’s hard to say when prophecy faded out in Judaism. The key dates in this long span are perhaps only two – 721 when the northern of the two kingdoms into which the Jews split after the time of King Solomon, centred on Samaria, was utterly destroyed by the Assyrians and 587 when the southern kingdom of Judah, centred on Jerusalem, suffered the deportation of its elites and

many of its inhabitants to Babylon, thus beginning what is known as the Exile.

The prophets are normally classified as either pre- or post-exilic (a few are actually exilic). In the first period, we find early on bands of ecstatic prophets who go in for trances, music and dancing – attached to the royal court, or to centres of worship; we also have identifiable individuals like Elijah, Elisha and Nathan who are towering figures; later, in the 700s, we find people like Amos and Hosea, and First Isaiah (there are three Isaiahs, actually), whose words have been collected and handed on by their disciples – they tend to issue oracles of judgement upon Israel, Judah and the nations – the community believed their word to have been fulfilled in the calamities of 721 and 587; just before the Exile we have the great figure of Jeremiah; during the exile the very familiar Second Isaiah and Ezekiel who proclaim a new vision and God’s restoration of his people; after the exile prophets like Haggai and Zechariah and Third Isaiah speak to the community of Jews who have returned to Jerusalem, offering some hope and promoting adherence to temple and law. Today, because it’s impossible to deal with all of this large body of material in a short address, I’m going to concentrate on the so-called classical prophets whose names are attached to collections of their sayings. I’ve named most of them already, beginning with Amos and Hosea.

Many of these prophets tell the story of their “call”. You might think of Amos: *I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me “Go, prophesy to my people Israel”.* (7.14-15). The call is a deeply personal affair, not something institutional or inherited, as priesthood in Israel was. It is a direct call from God and it gives them an entirely distinct and authoritative voice in their community. Sometimes it is a matter of visions – Ezekiel describes his very elaborate ones; sometimes

it is an experience in worship – witness the justly celebrated call of First Isaiah in the Temple in Isaiah 6, *in the year that King Uzziah died*..... Sometimes it is described as the coming of the word of the Lord – *now the word of the Lord came to me saying: before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations* – thus Jeremiah. It was a hard vocation, full of frustration and failure – Ezekiel had to speak to a “rebellious house” - but they were compelled to speak God’s Word in their words, often reworking the traditions of their community – *then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”*. *But the Lord said to me, “Do not say ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord”* – Jeremiah again, who more than once wished he had never been born and never called to this bitter and thankless task of being a prophet! It was in many ways a tragic vocation – they were so often not heard. The basic form of their speech is known as the oracle, typically prefaced by some such phrase as “thus says the Lord”. These oracles were remembered, collected, written down by their followers and form the core of what we now know as the books of the prophets.

So, what can we say about the basic elements of their message and thus what they say of God, our God? The prophets are real people with distinctive voices – you could not, for example, mistake Second Isaiah for Amos, or Hosea for Amos – but they adhere to common ideals, they show a measure of dependence upon common traditions, while always issuing a personal mediation of the Word.

Above all these prophets serve one God who, as Hosea says, is the Holy one in your midst – in other words, God is both beyond all human grasp and yet bears upon us. He is the only God who may be worshipped – the prophets constantly denounce the worship of other and false Gods and He is not only the Lord of

Israel but the Lord of the Universe – Second Isaiah proclaims this most eloquently. For the prophets God also bears upon us in moral demand. They saw very clearly that the God of Israel has a moral will and demands the worship of a moral life. They link religion and morality very closely. What does the Lord require of you – to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. And this is intimately connected with their overwhelming sense of God's justice and so of his implacable opposition to all injustice. Passages are endless, but this from Amos (5.10-15) is entirely typical: *They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.* God who is just requires just dealing from his people. In these prophets this is often connected with warnings against the danger of divorcing worship from life, of performing correct sacrifices and other religious duties, while persisting in sin and injustice. Two passages give an excellent flavour of this aspect of prophetic teaching: *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will*

dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"--only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jeremiah 7.1-10). The passage from Third Isaiah on true fasting which is often read on Ash Wednesday is in a similar vein: Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.....Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58.1-7).

So, a holy God who requires his worshippers to offer moral lives; a just God who seeks the just ordering of the society of his people. But also a God who cares passionately for the well-being of his people, who longs for their obedience and love, who keeps trying to help them not least by sending the prophets. So, we find Jeremiah saying: *Thus says the LORD: Only if I had not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth,*

would I reject the offspring of Jacob and of my servant David and not choose any of his descendants as rulers over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them. Or Second Isaiah: *He will feed his flock*

like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. And in some ways most remarkable of all, for we feel we are near the heart of God, Hosea: When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Amazing stuff! The kind of God who becomes flesh, perhaps?

Some concluding reflections, one about the church as a whole, one about our own discipleship. In effect, the prophets we've been considering tried to form the conscience of a community, tried in some way to be that conscience. They were not politicians and they did not propose political programmes. Is this familiar? In many ways this approximates to what we might call the prophetic vocation of the church in our own society. Like The church, once it gained a significant place in society, assumed the mantle of the prophets and saw itself called to proclaim the Word of God into any society in which it was set, like the prophets to keep the traditions and institutions of that society under review on God's behalf. But, in a society like ours, it is not called to side with any one party or interest in the state, but rather

to hold all up to the light of the Gospel and God's demand for justice, not least for the poor and oppressed – this it learns from the prophetic witness. And this is a major part of its public role. However, there are contexts in which more may be required by the prophetic nature of the church than this – we have seen that in South Africa and we see it in the struggles created by liberation theology in South America. At times the church must take sides – though always a calculation will be needed as to whether working to remove one tyranny will not merely usher in something at least as bad or even worse. Still, the abject failure of the church to live up to its prophetic vocation, say, in Germany in the 1930s, remains a terrible example of how easy it is to succumb to that which is against God. The church, which is prophetic by nature, therefore also needs prophets to speak to it.

And finally, our own discipleship. It seems to me that one of the most important legacies of the prophets to each of us is the constant challenge to see that our worship of God is not betrayed or mocked by the way we live, to see that if our worship is to be sincere and pleasing to God it has to arise out of a sincere attempt to live justly and mercifully, to pay attention to what is good and to resist what is evil and to know the difference. And so, it must be based on repentance, on honest acknowledgement of sin and failure and confidence in the overwhelming grace of God's love and compassion and forgiveness. Anything else, the prophets insist is futile, or worse than futile, it is false worship offered with contempt for God.