Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, July 2nd 2023

Preacher Canon Robert Titley

Readings Jeremiah 28.5-9 Matthew 10.40-42

I generally cycle here from where I live in Islington, and there is much to see and discover along the Euston and Marylebone Roads. One thing I have worked out is that I am one of perhaps only three cyclists in London who obey traffic lights. I thought there were only two of us – me and fellow clerical cyclist the Bishop of London – but one of our eight-thirty worshippers, Elias, says he does too. And there may other counter-cultural, prophetic, law-abiding pedallers in this service. I hope so.

I also spend some time looking at the backs of buses. Splashed across one last week was an advert offering help with Life’s Questions. It reminded me of Questions of Life, the book that accompanies Alpha, the world-famous Christian basics course from our neighbours at Holy Trinity Brompton; and also the 1989 campaign – now immortalised in the Victoria & Albert Museum – promoting evangelist Billy Graham’s visit to London: a series of posters, each with a different combination of the same four letters, such as IE.LF

Can anyone make sense of it?

The advert on this bus, however, was for Which? the consumer organisation. Now there are bigger questions in life than which air fryer did best in tests, but let’s not get too sniffy. Many Which? reports can be summarised under the heading, ‘How do it get my bills down to a survivable level?’ and that is the most pressing question for many in our nation just now.

Why are things like this? Ask that question at the deepest level and you move into the zone occupied in the Bible by the prophets, the theme of our readings today.

The prophecy of Jeremiah, appears in an extraordinary period, beginning in the late 600s BC, which sees the fall and rise and fall and rise of three Middle Eastern empires – Assyria, Babylon and Persia – all in under 75 years (612-540BC). Imagine being part of a small nation in those times, like a tiny boat in a vast, stormy sea. When we meet Jeremiah today, Jerusalem has been sacked, the temple looted and the nation’s elite deported to Babylon. Why are things like this? A modern historian would answer the question in terms of economic and military power. Jeremiah answers in terms of fundamental human choices and the purposes of God.

Jump forward just over five hundred years to Jesus in Galilee and we reach empire No. 5. No. 4, created by Alexander the Great, has come and gone, and the empire of the moment is now Rome.

Today, Jesus is sending out his disciples, and he calls them prophets too. Now you and I are called to be disciples, followers of Jesus, so are we supposed to be prophets? What could that possibly mean?

We generally hear the word nowadays in the context of predicting the future, and the Hebrew prophets do some of this. We hear Jeremiah today in a kind of rap battle with another prophet, Hananiah, who says that in two years all will be fine. Jeremiah sarcastically says that would be great, but don’t bet your life on it.

Jeremiah does speak of future events, then, but also about his people’s past and present. Like most of the prophets, he’s less about foresight than insight. Above all, he is about being a channel of communication between God and humanity.
We, like Jeremiah, live in extraordinary times. Think how our world has changed in 75 years: the end of the British Empire, the high noon of US superpower, the peak and fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, and now the lashing out of a weakened Russia. And while we are not oppressed by a foreign imperial power, we have been battered by a pandemic and the storm clouds of climate change are gathering. Why are things like this? Can anyone make sense of it? Who can be a prophet, a channel of communication between God and humanity, in times like these?

We can. First, we can be prophetic in what we do.

Notice how in the gospel reading Jesus speaks in almost the same breath of ‘prophet’ and ‘righteous person’: they are the same people. Being righteous (or just) is about doing the right thing, and deeds can be prophetic. They can speak to those who witness them. Nor do they have be big and grand.

Getting a sandwich (if you have time) for someone on the street by the tube station, keeping a reusable coffee cup in your bag, even (like the prophet Elias) obeying red lights on your bike, these could be seen as virtue signalling (especially if you look smug as you do them) but they can be small signs of another way of seeing the world: as a place of consequences, where we are accountable for what we do; as a place where we have legitimate claims upon each other; as God’s world, in which neighbours are there to be loved, as Jesus taught.

So much for deeds; what about words?

Earlier in chapter 10 Jesus tells his followers, ‘Don’t worry about what to say: you’ll be given the words,’ I have to say that is one of Jesus’ promises I find it hardest to trust, but perhaps I overthink it. It may be some great public statement that God calls a person to make but it’s more likely to be something quite intimate.

In another church where I work, in Islington, we have a home group that is at present doing a course on what’s called lectio divina (‘divine reading’) an ancient way of approaching the Bible as something to be prayed and lived, not just studied and understood.

One question last week was about prophecy, being a channel of communication between God and humanity: have you ever felt God not only speaking to you but wanting to speak through you?

This sounded rather grand to me, but one of the group said,

> Sometimes, the name of someone I know has come to my mind. When I have got in touch with the person (by a call or text) and I’ve found that – though there was no obvious reason to make contact – I was welcomed, because there was a conversation that needed to happen. And when I haven’t, I’ve usually regretted it.

Now that is an experience a lot of us have. See it as potentially prophetic, a possible prompt from God, and we’re more likely to do something about it.

One last thing. Whoever welcomes a prophet, says Jesus, in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. The words are addressed to the disciples but they are about the people who will receive the disciples. That is, sometimes it won’t be you and me taking the initiative, it will be a matter of how we respond to those who do. It is about the warm reception of goodness; and that is in short supply.

In an interview five years ago, Tim Berners Lee, the kindly inventor of the world wide web, discussed Twitter (currently the social medium of the moment) and likened it a petri dish:

> If you put a drop of love into Twitter it seems to decay, but if you put in a drop of hatred you feel it actually propagates much more strongly. And you wonder: ‘Well is that because of the way that Twitter as a medium has been built?’
Our world is skewed towards denunciation, to the takedown, the pile-on, to the stoking of anger, and it impoverishes us all. So whenever you and I find a person, or a group, say or do something that puts a drop of love into the world, for God’s sake let’s celebrate it, say thank you for it, encourage it, receive it hospitably. God will enrich us for it. Jesus says so.

Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.