

1. Sam Wells, a British priest and widely published writer who often appears on media, introduces one of his essays on prophets and prophecy, with the following anecdote.

'I was on a Christian radio show once, and the presenter was asking me about one of my books. He said, 'I guess you found yourself asking these questions and having these wonderings, and you thought, "I'll go look at the Bible and see what God wants to say about these things."' I wasn't looking to be argumentative, but I replied, 'In fact, it was the other way around. I was reading the Bible and it made me ask all these questions and have these wonderings.' I quickly realised that was the wrong answer, and before I knew it I wasn't talking to the presenter but to the producer and she was thanking me for being on the show and I was off air and gone.'

Hi point is this: we too often (almost always?) approach the Bible and the Christian story as a self-help manual. That is, we go looking for the answers to our latest specific concern. But instead, he is saying, we should learn to 'inhabit' the world of the Bible and the Christian story, so that in fact it, more and more, is able to shine a light into those parts of our lives which need to change. Instead of going to our faith and the Bible at times of question or concern, we should so inhabit our faith and the Bible that it gradually shows us a new way to be. And we might be surprised!

Prophets do just that for us. They break in with a vision from beyond, and challenge us in our lethargic here and now. They are uncomfortable. They are shocking. But we end up listening to them because we know, deep down, somewhere, they are speaking a deep truth.

2. And that is what John the Baptist did when he appeared in the region of the Jordan.

We know from elsewhere he was a strange, provocative figure (eating locusts and wild honey and dressed in a camel skin). He was challenging people. And he was speaking in vivid terms, apocalyptic terms.

But notice how precisely the gospel writer Luke tells us of the timing of his appearance. Luke is the gospel writer who writes most nearly as a historian.

'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, (3.1-3a)

Luke is very specific about time and place. And so that allows us to know the precise context: the Israelite people are in another time of crisis. We are in the year 29CE. We know that by then, the Israelite people were well and truly in a place again of desperation. The slightly more *laissez faire* Caesar Augustus had died 14 years previously, to be replaced by the more ruthless Tiberius. There was now direct Roman occupation in the southern part of Israel, and in the northern part, two local rulers (Herod Antipas and Philip) were in place – ruling by fear and oppression, and mostly regarded by the people as puppets without credibility to rule. The priests were little better. People were crying out for change. But change doesn't happen without an imaginative founding dream. And dreams have no power unless they appeal to something deep within us all. And that's when John the Baptist appears.

I have finally gotten around to starting a book I have been meaning to read for years: *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann, and American theologian. At the start he writes:

'The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.'

His point is that this prophetic ministry is very difficult to do: people usually go stray to one side or the other of this tension of brining the alternative into the present. To one side, they may propose alternative ways of being, but they usually lack gravitas and credibility (think maverick cults proclaiming 'the end of the world is nigh!'). Or to the other side (most likely us I think!) they simply propose sticking plasters which aren't much different to the status quo dominant culture. Rarely can a true prophet speak who gets the balance right – real dreams with real authenticity for the here and now!

3. But John the Baptist does get that balance. The people flock to hear him. They know he is on to something. And they are prepared to hear his hard message of repentance to start living that dream.

So what is his dream they find so appealing that they head out into the countryside to be baptised and to repent (literally, to change their mind, their whole way of being)? Notice, he is in the Jordan. That immediately casts us back to deep resonance for the people. The Israelites great story was one of escape from slavery in Egypt, crossing a river (the Red Sea), wandering directionless for a time, and then finally crossing the Jordan to return to their land where they would be free again. John the Baptist is right there: speaking right into that sense of history and moving to freedom. That resonance is deep. But then he is quoting an old prophet (or reimagining the message of various prophets of old).

***Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*** (Luke 3, 4-5)

What does it mean to make the paths straight? To level the mountains? To fill the valleys? To make the rough ways smooth? It means that it will be easier for God's way to come into the world, and also it will be easier for all to come to God. ('All flesh shall see the salvation of God.') It means no matter who you are, where you are from, what you have done, you can know God and God's peace. It means we can understand that all loved and all should be loved. It means God is for all and will be seen by all!

4. So what does that mean for us today?

The message remains the same: that God is for all and all are for God. But the challenge for us is that to understand and deeply live this, we need to be ready to repent. To change our minds. To change our hearts. To accept forgiveness for ourselves but also to live it for others. So that we too can pray as Paul does for the Philippians (1.3):

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.

The message is the same, but our 21st century context is different. Each of us too, in our own little and humble ways, can point to this bigger story of the one who first loved us. Living and proclaiming a life which says 'God is for all, and all will see God!' And so we might, in our own small ways, become prophets in the way we live. May God bless us each as we seek to make the rough places smooth.