

## HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Bible Readings: Isaiah 58:1-14

John 6:16-34

Date: 1 November 2015

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As I hope you know by now, we are making our way through a short series of sermons looking afresh at our vision – to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope.

We have looked at the vision as a whole, at faith and love.

Today we are thinking about hope and something about the prophetic.

I don't know what image we conjure up when we think about prophets? What kind of people were the Isaiahs, Jeremiahs, the Amoses and the Hoseas of their day?

Do we think of OT prophets as angry and ranting? Sometimes they were. Sometimes they were encouraging and affirming also.

What do we think of the NT prophet, a man like John the Baptist for example? Was he just weird: eating a most strange diet of locusts and wild honey? Or was he a critical player in the drama of the entry into the world of his cousin Jesus?

Or what about modern day prophets? TV prophets like the ones I grew up with? Michael Fish, the weatherman; or

Russell Grant or Mystic Meg, the astrologers – were they, are they reliable predictors of the future?

If we believe the ad man who works for BMW we know well enough what they say about all this in their new Series & advertising campaign: “The best way to predict the future is to create it”.

Prophets in the OT were those who heard from God and spoke up for him in their day and to his people. They were often unpopular because the message they brought was a tough one and not necessarily what anyone wanted to hear. No one wants bad news when you think everything is going OK or at least you are pretending it is.

But there is some truth in the thought that prophets of old and the prophetic voice of the church today will be one of two things: judging and condemnatory or encouraging and affirming. Or maybe it will actually be both?

Let's look at this a bit more ...

### **judging and condemnatory**

In Isaiah 58, it is clear that the people thought they were doing the right things as far as God was concerned. They were fasting. They were humbling themselves. They were going through the motions. They were doing it all right and properly.

Isaiah has the job of pointing out that far from this being the only angle on the reality of what was going on, they were also actually serving their own interests and

oppressing their workers. They were quarrelling and they were fighting. Isaiah is very clear – the people were in open rebellion against God and his ways.

In other words they may have been doing all the right things on Sunday but their Monday to Saturday life just sucked. All the outward facing show counted for nothing. St Paul was very clear about this too. In Galatians 6:7 we read that God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. God knows what's going on. God is nobody's fool.

And Isaiah makes this plain. Isaiah explains that looking good on Sunday is just not enough. What is required, what God is looking for in those who sincerely seek to follow him is “loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless to your home, covering the naked”.

In other words: pious talk with no sacrificial action just doesn't cut it. Or as James puts it very simply in chapter 2 of his letter:

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?*

*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*

So here we see Isaiah in the OT, and Paul and James in the NT taking a prophetic role in helping God's people to see the error of their ways and helping them find a way back to God in honest repentance.

It's the role of the prophet to bring this kind of dysfunction to the people's attention. It's not a popular call. And it's no kind of easy ride.

So God calls people sometimes to take on the role of prophet. We see that in the bible.

We see that also in history ... where the people taking on the role of the prophetic are not necessarily Christian. And even if they are not, God can still use them in this way.

This week Kathryn and I have had a fantastic holiday break in Devon. We stayed on a farm in a little cottage and enjoyed superb views from the sitting room and some great walking in the Lydford Gorge.

We also had some rain and went to the little local cinema in Okehampton. It was great fun at the Box Office where Kathryn was asked if she wanted an armchair or a sofa! Amazing setup!

We had gone to see the film “Suffragette”. If you have seen it you will know that it is a film about the situation in this country in the time when women had very little say in their own personal affairs; or had very little say in the way they were employed: they were very often abused and exploited in the work place. This was a time when women had no say at all in the affairs of state. They had very few rights and no ability to vote.

Through the eyes of an imaginary character Maud Watts, the film “Suffragette” charts the story of Emmeline Pankhurst and her movement. Quiet protest has led to little

or no change and as the story unfolds we see peaceful protest develop into a campaign of civil disobedience and direct action. Culminating in a dramatic real-life episode at Epsom Races in 1913 we see the government of the day realize that the status quo cannot continue and that something will have to be done.

Ultimately this series of events would lead to a change in the law and the granting of the right to vote for half the population in the UK ... but not until 1925. The closing credits include a list of the countries where still today this right has not been afforded to women, countries where the struggle goes on.

We might say that Emmeline Pankhurst, very briefly but beautifully played by Meryl Streep, was a prophet in her day. She was pointing out to the authorities as best she could that injustice and inequality for women were not good; neither were they godly. It seems that sometimes God can use unlikely people to effect the kind of change which is more in line with the values of his Son and of the kingdom. The prophetic edge in the telling of the story of this woman and her colleagues is really compelling.

Still today, those who seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus may find themselves required to take up this kind of prophetic role.

Here at HTS, we talk about our vision: to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope.

As members of the church today we can be that voice when we sign petitions, write to MPs, express concern,

engage with the economics and politics of our day. Even this week there has been a lot of comment in Christian circles on the role of the House of Lords to hold back and hold in check the apparent disregard for the poor and the most needy in our society.

A voice of hope can be big like this, it can be national or even international.

Or it can be very small. A word of encouragement for someone who has had bad news and doesn't know which way to turn. A little note to say you are not forgotten. A small gift to indicate love.

And this leads us to the other side of the coin ... if the role of the prophet is to bring judgement and condemnation, it is also to offer encouragement and affirmation.

### **encouraging and affirming**

Isaiah makes it clear that if the people repent and change and work hard on their attitudes and motives, get their hearts right with God then there will be blessing and relationship and a much brighter future.

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and he will say: here I am. Your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.*

I know it's a bit crude, but there is something here of the carrot and the stick ... or the stick and the carrot.

God's desire always and only is for his people to relate to him, to love him, to desire him and to seek him. God holds out a carrot. When people turn their backs, do their own thing rather than his thing, look to their own interests rather than the interests of others, the prophet speaks for God to get the people's attention and to get their ear. God wields a verbal stick. But in the challenge of the stick, there is also the encouragement of the carrot. There is the affirming word that God is there for them and loves them still, and longs for them to return to him. And if they do they will know his blessing.

We might today call this tough love. That sometimes the answer is no. But in the setting of boundaries, there is freedom. In the obeying of rules, there is release. In submitting to the authority of almighty God, there is promise and hope for the future.

The Message Version of the final verses puts it like this. He is talking about the Sabbath (using that as an example of rule keeping or rule breaking – and I don't think he is necessarily talking about the current debate on extending Sunday trading legislation (although he might be!) ... he says this:

*13-14 "If you watch your step on the Sabbath  
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,  
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,  
GOD's holy day as a celebration,  
If you honour it by refusing 'business as usual,'*

*making money, running here and there—  
Then you'll be free to enjoy GOD!  
Oh, I'll make you ride high and soar above it all.  
I'll make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor  
Jacob."*  
*Yes! GOD says so!*

Friends, here is the first part of a two-part look at the prophetic. We return to the theme in two weeks time when we take a more personal look at it.

For now, let's pause and reflect:

Judging and condemnatory

Encouraging and affirming

Carrot and Stick/ Stick and Carrot.

Challenge and Blessing.

Discipline and freedom.

Let's pray ...