

21st Century Prophets

I still remember the day when the penny suddenly dropped. It was appropriately enough during an Old Testament studies lecture in my first year at Theological College. I was looking out of the window at the time, and it was then that I noticed the rotting frame and realised that if someone did not take remedial action soon, the glass would fall out and potentially do some serious damage.

This rather confused revelation requires further explanation. At the time the maintenance manager had been forced to retire through ill-health, so a number of students were allowed to earn away some of their fees by doing various odd jobs around the place. I was one of them, so could be forgiven I hope for taking a deeper interest in the state of the window frame than might normally be expected during an Old Testament lecture. But what has this to do with prophecy?

Like many adult Christians, I grew up in a church community, so became well familiar with the stories of the Bible through Sunday School, Boys' Brigade and the like. Nothing wrong with that, but I was beginning to realise how readily I'd hung on to those early, simple explanations of Biblical truth, and not always let them mature as they should have done. So having been told at the age of five that prophets were people enabled by God to tell the future, I'd more or less stayed with that description ever since. I perceived them as a sort of religiously acceptable version of the fortune tellers and palm readers that you might find at seaside holiday resorts or at some Mind, Body and Spirit fair.

But as I looked at the decaying window frame, I realised that to some degree my interpretation of the situation could be legitimately described as prophetic. I was predicting the future and, had I chosen to stand in the college foyer and pronounce the mournful message that *"within the next twelvemonth, shards of broken glass will litter the lecture room floor,"* I could be reasonably certain that without remedial intervention, my oracle would in time be proven correct.

But this insight had not come through some great moment of supernatural revelation or deep spiritual encounter, but the straightforward synthesis of my observational skills, practical experience and sense of responsibility. And as I reflected on the manifestations of God's truth written by those revered Old Testament bards that I was now studying, it struck me that a fair amount of their ministry could be similarly attributed.

We have to recognise of course that the heart of our understanding of Biblical prophecy is expressed through that ubiquitous prefix *"Thus saith the Lord"* and I certainly do not wish to reduce our understanding of the role of the prophet, contemporary or otherwise, simply to that of a social commentator or political activist. But while retaining that sense of divine revelation as a defining element within that which we call prophetic, I would argue that the desire to seek out, apply and propagate God's revealed truth on a particular matter or situation lay in the prophet's own grasp and awareness of those circumstances.

The slightly misfit figure, pronouncing the forthcoming downfall of a nation or declaring God's faithfulness in the midst of turmoil was watching the developing social and political trends, embracing the lessons of history and reflecting on the scriptures to inform and nurture a message that they would eventually declare with confidence as the Word of the Lord. That is not to deny the inner voice of the Spirit, but to recognise that he speaks most clearly and relevantly in the midst of everyday experience.

My prophetic insights into the state of the college window frames may be somewhat mundane in comparison, but they nonetheless illustrate the principle. The wellbeing of that particular group of God's people relied in a small way on listening to and acting upon the words of one who had the experience and knowledge to recognise the direction of events and commend remedial action.

I was reminded of this during Ian Arbon's recent insightful address to an ICF members and friends evening in the Midlands which few would fail to describe as prophetic. Ian spoke with authority and wisdom on a number of important issues around sustainability and world energy use, a summary of which is reported elsewhere. But



without detracting from the content of his address, I would suggest that he also demonstrated this significant prophetic dynamic. He presented his audience with some hard and disturbing realities, he offered an uncompromising critique of government initiatives and policies and most of all helped us to see the practical implications of being the servants of a Creator God in relation to a number of contemporary environmental concerns.

It is into these and similarly relevant issues that our 21st Century Prophets need to speak, (and in comparing them with their Old Testament counterparts we can note a prevailing concern about the political and military intentions of Israel's Middle Eastern neighbours.) We need a Church that can speak powerfully and knowledgeably in today's world; bringing God's truth to bear on the social, political, environmental and economic issues that confront it.

The contemporary prophet needs to be rooted in their faith convictions and to cultivate a living relationship with the risen Christ, but it also requires a level of insight that will seldom be fostered within the environs of the Church alone, it is a prophetic edge that is much more likely to be forged by participation in the world of politics, industry and commerce.

Yet this is a prophetic voice which the contemporary church can all too easily, albeit at times unwittingly, serve to silence rather than release. The world of work might play an important role in informing the message of the prophets of our age, but they will never emerge if their experience of Christian community is one where workplace issues are somehow seen as an irrelevant and unnecessary intrusion; insufficiently "spiritual" to be of real importance. We need to encourage people to speak about their workplace experiences, make church a place where they are not afraid to share the moral dilemmas and ethical struggles that life in today's world inevitably incurs.

When that fails to happen, we are the poorer for it – I well remember being part of a preaching workshop in which we were divided into small groups to reflect on the well known beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart". In our group were two full-time ministers and an Industrial Chemist. We theologians quickly latched on to the ethical and theological dilemmas contained within the statement and the relative significance of the Greek aorist tense which introduced it. It was only when we had finished, that our colleague began to speak about his understanding of purity, what it means and how it is achieved, from the perspective of a Chemical Engineer. He brought to our conversation a whole series of rich pastoral images and applications that theology alone had not managed to so clearly uncover – it was indeed a prophetic revelation. Another example is that of a High Court judge who recently led a seminar at a Christian conference on the changing social trends in today's Britain. His presentation was rich, insightful and deeply theological, yet honed through years of presiding over the in-depth scrutiny of the motives, actions and consequences of criminal behaviour. These are the voices that need to be heard; these are the prophets of our age.

As this new century enters its second decade, the task of ICF and organisations like it is to continue to campaign and work for a Church which recognises, nurtures and releases those prophetic voices; a church which is a place of listening as well as proclamation. There will always be a need, and great benefit to be gained from gathering and disseminating the insights and reflections of the workplace prophets in every generation, and through its history ICF has contributed its fair share in this respect. Yet it seems that this is a secondary task to simply developing a contemporary church environment where conversations and shared experiences of living out faith in every aspect of life are commonplace. In that way every community of believers will heighten its knowledge and insight into those issues which most directly affect it, and each member of those communities will engage in their Monday to Friday lives, recognising this to be a key element in the outworking of the faith we share.

Work enables us to see things, experience things, engage with situations and circumstances that we might otherwise never encounter. The working lives of its members is a crucial lens through which the Church can deepen its insights into those worlds which as institution alone it might never encounter. Our belief in a God who speaks remains undeterred and many would share the conviction that our 21st Century world needs to hear the voice of God afresh. The prophets of this age are those who can bring the message of the workplace into the Church so that in turn the message of the Church might be heard in the workplace.