

Speaking Truth

Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

Where have all the prophets gone? Where is this century's Martin Luther King? (Or Emmeline Pankhurst? Or William Wilberforce? Or John Knox?) Where are the great prophets and preachers of yesteryear who challenged the establishment and called the people to live lives of faith? How many years do we have to go back to find the great characters of society and culture who commanded respect? How much further do we have to go back in any country to find politicians whose words we could trust and whose manifesto promises were kept? That one might require a time machine admittedly.

I suspect part of the problem with prophets is that they aren't usually very popular. These are the women and men who rarely predict the future, but are more often sharp social commentators on the present, and what effect the present will have on the future if things do not change. Prophets are women and men who see the world as it is and wonder how it might be if change was to come. Prophets are women and men who are unafraid to speak truth to power, at whatever personal cost. Prophets are people who will not keep quiet. They are not comfortable to be around for any length of time, because not only do they make us look at the injustices and problems of the world; they make us look at ourselves and ask what we are doing with our lives to make the world less unjust and to help solve its problems.

Pastor Martin Niemöller is best known for writing *First They Came* - one of the most famous poems about the Holocaust. He is a complicated figure. Initially an antisemitic Nazi supporter, his views changed when he was imprisoned in a concentration camp for speaking out against Nazi

control of churches. He later encouraged Germans to take responsibility for Nazi atrocities. His poem:

*First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.*

Prophets, the speakers of uncomfortable truths into their contemporary world, are rarely easy to be around because, unlike us at times, they speak out. Consistently.

Moses had been a great leader of the Israelites, but his had not been an easy task. He spoke great truths to his people, and sometimes they listened, and sometimes they did not. But Moses spoke truth. He found his relationship with God a difficult one, but Moses spoke with words inspired by God to challenge the people and shape the people and move the people on. God provided the words. In his truth-speaking, Moses is like a great window through which the light of God shone. In that Old Testament reading we heard God promising to raise up another, or is it many others, who will also be given truths to speak. Who will continue Moses' work to speak truth to power and truth to the people, so that things might change. I don't think this is simply a foretelling of Jesus, though clearly it fits. It's a pointing towards the many others who, shaped by their faith, find themselves unable to keep still or stay quiet. People who know when it's necessary to speak sharply about the bad things in life and do something about them. People who know when it's

necessary to speak sharply about the good things in life and remind us that there is much for which we ought to be thankful.

When we think things are going well, and become lazy and complacent, and ignore the problems, we need people to give us that sharp jolt to bring us back to our senses and realise that all is not well, and something needs to be done. Equally when things are bad, and we despair that anything will ever be right or good again, we need people to give us a sharp jolt to bring us back to our senses and realise that there is still light, and there is still hope, because there is still God, and there are still people who want to get on with things and help.

We have people like that in our congregation. People who give their lives in public service, working for the homeless and those needing clothing and food and shelter; calling their friends and communities to accountability not simply by standing up at meetings and social gatherings and saying what needs to be done, but getting on and doing what needs to be done.

Moses didn't simply make grand utterances about God's wisdom and love. He organized his nomadic community in the wilderness. He gave them laws and mediated their disputes. He fed them and cared for them and helped them deal with their insecurities and concerns.ⁱ The prophet Moses wasn't only about *speaking* the truth; he was about *doing* the truth.

Where have all the prophets gone? They're working in charity shops and soup kitchens. They're organising fund-raising events in churches and schools to help people in need. They're highlighting the plight of people with dementia. They're taking part in rallies calling for peace in the Middle East, for Jews and Arabs and Christians. They're supporting the work of Christian Aid. They're making television dramas about the Post Office scandal. They're speaking to politicians during Question Time and pointing to their lacklustre track record, or their still unsubstantiated promises about how problems *will* be addressed *after* the next election. They're calling out the

racism of 'Stop the Boats' which seeks to cocoon us from the geopolitical problems of the human race; they are calling out for an education system properly funded, and a National Health Service and Social Care system that meets the needs of society young and old alike. They're saying to politicians and business people that poor role-leadership models when it comes to speaking the truth, and accountability, and not feathering your own nest before caring for the needs of others matters; or a landlord company bullying a tenant in an unheated flat barely a mile from here; or ignoring a housing stock-crisis which cannot meet the needs of our population; or ignoring climate change; and saying 'this will not do'. And not just to politicians and business people, but to churches and other national institutions and professions who have sometimes lost their vision and have drifted from what God's people really want and need in life.

And then there is Jesus. He starts of saying things and doing things. People in pain. People in trouble. People distressed. People on the edges. And Jesus, this nobody from nowhere, starts making a difference.

I imagine the people of the day in that synagogue in Capernaum, maintaining a safe distance from the persistently sick people, and maintaining a safe distance from Jesus. Speculating amongst themselves about this powerful new teacher. Who is He? How is He doing these things? Why is He doing these things now, and here?

I don't know that Jesus cares about His fame spreading everywhere through the Galilee. He was focussed on listening to the troubles people shared with Him. He was focussed on doing what He could to make their lives a little bit easier. And He was focussed on speaking the truth. To the sinfulness of His time. To the brokenness of His time. To the injustices of His time. To the faithlessness of His time. He sees what needs to be done. He hears what needs to be done. He says what He is going to do. He does it.

I wonder how often we look around for leaders, or prophets, or trend-setters, or social media influencers, who will somehow show us the way, and what to do, and how to be? Is that abdicating our personal responsibilities? Even Moses, when first called by God to lead the Israelites, tried to fob God off with, "...I am not eloquent...but I am slow of speech and of tongue...send, I pray, some other person..." But God says, no, Moses, it's you I want, and promises to give him words, a promise repeated at the end of Moses' ministry to those who would follow on. With Jesus words of authority are given, backed up by actions that address directly the needs of His day.

Might it not be the same for us now, in our unsettled world? A call to speak the truth, even if our voice is shaking. A call to stand up for justice, and to do something about it, even though we know we won't fix everything. A recognition that sometimes it is the things that break our heart that ends up fixing our vision. In a world where ethics are often portrayed as being on a back-burner; and where good people are pushed aside by the selfish and the unprincipled, there has never been a greater need for people to speak the truth, to do the truth, and to bring the truth to bear on as many of the hurts in the world as we can.

We might not touch them all, but God will. We might not see it fixed in our generation, but we can, like Moses, like Jesus, be sure that there are others coming after us to whom we can pass on the torch of truth. Because God's truth now revealed will never be silenced. The reign of God, in all its messy love and persistent grace, and unquenchable hope, has been let loose on earth. We are called to speak for it, and work with it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Verity A Jones, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, pps292-4