

Prophets

in the

Old Testament by Frank Bowe

November ... speaking truth to power

When

we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word at Mass we usually have an Old Testament reading and often this is from one of the Prophets. Who were these men, what did they say & why are they so important even today?

Moses is generally held to be the first & greatest of them & we see Elijah & Elisha following in his footsteps. Subsequently we have the Prophets who have books named after them divided into Major & Minor, the former being Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel & Daniel. They are not in any chronological order but broadly in order of length.

What did they say? The Prophet is a mouthpiece. He has no doubt that the `word of God` has come to him and must be passed on. One of the many definitions of a Prophet is that `he speaks truth to power`. He sees present & future through God's eyes & reminds Rulers, Nations, Religious Leaders & Societies of their duty to God & the consequences of their failure to heed God's message. That message can be one of warning, one of admonishment, one of encouragement, one of love. No subject is beyond the word of God. It can be expressed by speaking or by symbolic action. Nothing is outside God's view of his people.

What is the importance of the Prophetic word today? It is stating the obvious to say that sinfulness, wrongdoing & corruption is as prevalent today as it was in Old Testament times. We have to ask ourselves where are the Prophets who will `speak truth to power` in present day circumstances. Perhaps we should reflect on this when we hear the voice of Prophecy coming to us down the ages at our Sunday Liturgy.

Just a word about false prophets. They figure a lot in the Old Testament & the gift of Discernment is needed to expose them. More of this in future articles. Hopefully I can continue the series with pen-pictures of the individual Prophets & their lives & ministries starting with Isaiah.

December ... a season of expectant hope and joy

It is

almost an impossible task to compress one of the longest books in the Old Testament into a few words. We are in the season of Advent approaching the Nativity and Isaiah is particularly associated with this time in the Church's liturgical year. All the four Old Testament readings for the Sunday Masses of Advent and the Nativity are from Isaiah so I'll look at him from this perspective.

He was born about 765 B.C. and received his call to prophecy in the Temple in 749 B.C. in dramatic fashion as told in Chap.6 where you can read the full account. It is generally thought he was martyred sometime after the year 700. His work was continued by his followers and scholars think that there were at least 3 authors involved in the final written book. It contains some of the finest, most lyrical prose ever written.

The word Advent means `coming` and the season is one of expectant hope and joy. **On the first Sunday** we are given the vision of Isaiah for Jerusalem and it contains much of what we wish for our world of today. **On Sunday two** the vision is of peaceful co-existence and the animal kingdom is used in a passage of powerful symbolism. We can all see this as the type of world we would like to inhabit. **Sunday three** encourages the weary and faint hearted the sick and the fearful, to take heart in a joyful vision of the future overseen by the Lord. **Sunday four** brings Advent to a climax by prophesying a sign from the Lord in the figure of a child born of a virgin and given the name of Emmanuel – `God with us`.

These readings give us one facet of the mission of a Prophet, consolation for the downtrodden and a vision of encouragement for the future. It is what we all need to prepare us for the coming of our Saviour at Christmas when we shall see light overcoming the darkness and the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, in our midst.

Thank you Isaiah for speaking God's word to us through the ages. May we listen to them with greater attention this year.

January ... there has never been such a prophet in Israel

“He was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye undimmed, his vigour unimpaired. Since then, there has never been such a prophet in Israel, the man God knew face to face” That is what Scripture has to say about this remarkable man. He probably has more influence on Judaism and its culture right up to the present than any other person in history and his impact on our Christian faith to this day is profound. Jesus mentions him and he figures in the Transfiguration story. His name is Moses.

We probably know more about him than any of the other prophets his birth to a Hebrew couple, his rescue and adoption by Pharaoh's daughter and his upbringing as a prince of Egypt. All this changed when he became aware of his roots, killed an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew and had to flee. He took refuge in Midian, a remote district east of Sinai and married one of the seven daughters of Jethro, the local priest. Moses settled in Midian for many years during which time Pharaoh died and the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt grew worse. It was then that Moses received his Prophetic call in a very dramatic way. You can read all about it in Exodus starting at Chapter 2 v23 and reading to the end of Chapter 4 as space does not permit me to recount the whole story and there is much more to come.

Moses appears to have had a speech impediment and God chose Aaron, his brother to be his mouthpiece and the two of them set off on their prophetic mission to speak God's words to Pharaoh, the world's most powerful man. It is interesting to note that at the time of their first interview with Pharaoh Moses was 80 years old and Aaron 83!

We all know the outcome, Pharaoh's obduracy about releasing the Hebrews from slavery and the nine plagues, water to blood, frogs, mosquitoes, gadflies, death of the Egyptian's livestock, boils, hail, locusts & darkness, followed by the death of all the first-born of the Egyptians. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh relented and let the Hebrews go. After a change of mind Pharaoh's army pursued the Hebrews and were destroyed at the crossing of the Red Sea, an event we recall during the Easter Liturgy.

There follows an account of the Hebrews wanderings in the wilderness for many years under the leadership and guidance of Moses who's patience was often put to the test. We have the miracle of the manna & quails, the water from the rock and the battle against the Amalekites. The Ten Commandments were handed down followed by the incident of the golden calf.

There is so much more to add to this story and I can only encourage those who wish to know more to read the Book of Exodus. There are some obscure passages but if read selectively it can be very rewarding.

The death of Moses is recounted at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy which is where this article started. He fulfilled all the signs of a prophet, his birth story, his unremarkable early life, his call. He spoke God's word to the powerful, he was a leader, he served, he encouraged, but vitally he had a personal experience of God. Until Jesus was born he was perhaps the most important person in salvation history. He was the man "God knew face to face".

March ... Hosea, a prophet for our time

My next pen-picture is of the prophet Hosea. The culture of Israel about 720BC when he has The love of God for his people is characterised by the Hebrew word `hesed` which is hard to translate into English. It is an all-embracing love perhaps best understood if one reads Paul's description in 1 Corinthians Chap.13. Just as Hosea forgives Gomer and restores her as his wife, so God will forgive Israel for its many lapses and restore His people to their place in His love.

Occasionally we sing a hymn in Church (no.842) `Come back to Me`. This sums up the central thrust of Hosea – the enduring love of God exemplified by the love and forgiveness of a man for his erring wife Perhaps there are lessons to be learned for today's people in the words of Hosea.

One final thought that you might care to consider. Jesus himself twice asked his listeners to go and reread Hosea. Cf. Matthew. 9:13 and 12:7. Why not do the same? You will find it rewarding.

April ... The Easter Vigil

I have been writing about the Old Testament Prophets but perhaps it is appropriate to pause at this time to look at the prophetic part of the liturgy for the Easter Vigil. The vast scope of the Easter Triduum defeats any attempt to condense it for inclusion here so I shall concentrate on the Old Testament readings in the Vigil liturgy.

I have often thought that these readings are the most under rated part of the service. There are seven readings with their accompanying psalms and prayers and they are usually reduced to three on the grounds of time. Whilst this is understandable it is sad and I'll say why I think that way.

The whole thrust of the Easter story is to tell how Jesus' passion, death and resurrection led to our redemption. This is often called Salvation History and what the readings do is to set out the part that the Old Testament plays in that History. I'll try to explain how.

The first reading is the account of Creation from Genesis. Salvation History starts from there, 'male and female he created them' on the sixth day and left all he had made in their care. It is well worth reading the Psalm and the prayer that follows each reading to get a perspective on its meaning.

In the second reading we take our first steps on the road to salvation which starts with Abraham and leads to Jesus. God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son. Reading this story we recall that God so loved the world that he did not spare His only son.

The next (third) reading is always read. It chronicles the defining event in Judaism, the Exodus, the liberation from slavery into freedom. It was a long and weary march which symbolises our journey, as a people and as individuals, to the freedom of the children of God.

Reading four is where God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to tell of his unfailing love which accompanies

us on the road to salvation. Again from Isaiah the fifth reading gives a vision of God in words of great beauty. The prophet lifts our eyes and hearts to the grandeur of the God who waits to greet us at the end of our journey to salvation.

The little known prophet, Baruch, tells the people of Israel, 'You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom' in the sixth reading. For Christians this fountain is the risen Lord and if we heed his words we shall find life and enjoy peace at the end of our journey.

The seventh and last reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, brings the journey to a conclusion where God promises to remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh and he will put his spirit in us. What more can we ask for?

If time does not permit us to read and reflect on all seven readings it is well worth doing this personally at Eastertide. It prepares us well for the Resurrection story which follows. Happy Easter everybody.

June ... Joel, The Prophet of Pentecost

The Prophet Joel

is thought to have worked about 400 BC.

He is sometimes called the prophet of Pentecost and it is appropriate to write about him at this point in the Church's year.

Joel prophesies the outpouring of the Spirit on all God's people. This will be fulfilled with the descent of the Spirit on the Apostles recounted in Acts.2 16-21. St. Peter actually quotes the Prophecy in his first address after the Pentecost experience when the Apostles are thought by some to "have been drinking too much new wine". We perhaps need to look a little more closely at the link between Joel and the New Testament events with which we are familiar.

Surprisingly the story begins with our old friend Moses. In Chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers he is asked to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying and expresses the wish that "the whole people of God were prophets and God gave his spirit to them all". This arises from Moses having shared the spirit that was given to him with some of the Elders of Israel during the Exodus. This theme of the outpouring of the Spirit pervades the whole area of Old Testament prophesy and is encapsulated in Joel.

His prophesy is made up of two parts. The first is an account of a plague of locusts, its cause and consequences. God calls the whole community to prayer, fasting and repentance in familiar words, giving them a vision of

plenty and prosperity. Part two is all about the new age to be experienced by Israel. It will be preceded by the outpouring of the Spirit quoted by Peter in the Pentecost account in Acts 2. Here is the link between Old and New Testaments we find so often.

But what is brought about by this outpouring of the Spirit? The first recorded effect is the ability of the Apostles to speak in words understood by the myriad of listeners who were present at the event, “we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God”.

Next is the spirit of repentance felt by those who heard Peter’s call. We are told they “were cut to the heart” and about three thousand were converted. Christianity (although it was not already called that) took off from that point.

For the rest of it we shall have to go elsewhere, John’s Gospel, Paul’s Letters et al but that is for another day. I conclude by reflecting that the sending of the Spirit is the result of a promise made by Jesus at the Last Supper to his Apostles and as confirmed by Peter in Acts 2.39, “the promise that was made is for you and your children, and for all those who are far away, for all those whom the Lord our God will call to himself” and just a reminder that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity whose feast concludes the Lent/Easter/Pentecost story we celebrate.

All this from a minor prophet like Joel!