

Advent 1

Picture this. No social media, radio or even wide-spread literacy. When God needed a way to reveal His Words to His people, he chose Prophets to be His messengers.

One description of a prophet on the WWW is - one who speaks the Words of a higher authority.

Dr Robert Plummer, an American Professor of Biblical Studies, enlarges this definition: "A true prophet was called and equipped by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform their job: to speak God's message - to warn of coming judgment and the consequences if people refused to repent and obey."

So, the primary prophetic call to the people appears to be to listen to the Word of God, to repent and to trust in God.

It is not easy being a prophet. God chooses the prophets; it is not an option. Let's look at a couple.

Moses brought the people of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. The people regularly forgot, or ignored, God's Word and then complained to Moses when things got tough. Moses was even denied the Promised Land as he led the people of Israel through 40 years of exile.

The prophetess Deborah led Israel sometime around the 11th century BCE. In the book of Judges, we are told that she held court under a palm tree where she settled Israelite disputes. One day Deborah said to Barak, one of her military leaders, "The Lord God of Israel commands you"... to take 10 thousand men and conquer the army of the King of Canaan, which was led by Sisera, a cruel commander. Barak said "If you go with me I will go but if you don't go with me I won't go". You can almost see her roll her eyes! She said "Very well. I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman." Barak defeated the Canaan army, and as prophesied, Sisera was eventually killed by a woman. But that's another story.

The prophets spoke of actions and consequences. The penalties for ignoring God's instructions were usually delivered in brutal detail. Here is Moses again in Deuteronomy. He begins "if you do not obey..." and he goes on, for 68 verses, to list the curses that will come to them - "cursed in the city and cursed in the country ..everything you put your hand to will come to ruin .. The Lord will plague you with diseases" etc.

But the rewards for following His Word were many and wonderful. Last week's Psalm tells of God's promise to David "if your children will keep My covenant and the commands which I teach them: their children also shall sit upon your throne for ever". A prophesy was God's way of telling His people how to live every day as well as provide visions of the future.

We should also look at how God's Word is remembered. A prophet may be heard speaking God's Word, but religious art reminds us of these words. The theology of art is discussed in many literary articles, including about the work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones who didn't adhere to any particular religious institution, yet his religious attitude and outlook remains evident. We are fortunate to have three examples of his work in our windows - St Paul, Jonathan and Michael. Burne-Jones is considered to be one of the great religious painters of the world.

If Religious art could perhaps be viewed as a sort of prophetic memory-jogger, do our windows jog our memories of the prophets and the way they spoke God's Word?

The Crucifixion Window and the War window and the Peace window, show Jesus Christ, the greatest of all the prophets. He was God's spokesman sent into the world to save sinners. In today's Gospel, He speaks to His disciples about the coming of the Son of Man and of how to prepare for this day. But He was certainly not popular for preaching that the laws of man were

not necessarily God's laws. Jesus paid the ultimate price for being God's messenger, as did many prophets before and after Him.

St Paul initially spoke for a different higher authority. He was a Pharisee - and he zealously persecuted the followers of Jesus. But he saw the light on the road to Damascus, turned down his sword and accepted the Word of God. He was baptised and spent the rest of his life preaching, primarily to the gentiles, about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and eternal life for all who believe and follow the Word of God. He was himself persecuted for preaching God's Word and was executed for his devotion.

St John was a fisherman and one of the first apostles to follow Jesus. He also appears in our Crucifixion window as he stood at the cross when Jesus made him the guardian of His Mother. It is believed that he wrote five of the books of the New Testament and spent his life as an evangelist preaching the Gospel.

St Peter was one of the earliest disciples of Jesus. Originally called Simon, Jesus named him Peter to be the rock on which His Church would be built. Jesus promised to give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, which is why he is often depicted holding keys. Peter was the first to preach after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and he continued to preach the Gospel for 15 years after Jesus' crucifixion.

David was a shepherd when the prophet Samuel anointed him as the future King of Israel. Samuel quotes David as saying "the spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue" and when Peter preached at Pentecost, he referred to David as a prophet. David was also a poet and a musician, but essentially, he was a soldier who united the 12 kingdoms of Israel under his kingship, as was prophesied. Throughout his life, David prepared for the construction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem but because he had been a man of war, he was not allowed to build it himself. Before his death he delivered a set of instructions to his son telling him to follow the Words of God.

If we move into more recent times, we can find people who preached the Word of God and people who encouraged others to work towards a better future.

Valiant for Truth is the hero of the 17th century book "Pilgrim's Progress" written by John Bunyan. The book tells of Valiant's quest to journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

The author, John Bunyan, was originally a tinker with little formal education, yet he wrote 58 books, the majority of which were doctrinal expositions of scripture. As a Puritan, Bunyan was imprisoned for 12 years for preaching without state approval. When he was eventually released, he preached to huge crowds for another 16 years - and in defiance of continued persecution of Puritanism. His last Words from the pulpit were "Live like the children of God and you may look your Father in the face with comfort another day."

The Crucifixion window is in memory of Richard Schombergk, the second director of the Adelaide Botanical Gardens (1865-1891). He was the son of a Lutheran pastor, and while we are not aware that he preached God's Word, he was certainly a learned man of Words and actions that would benefit South Australia's future. He was responsible for planting thousands of trees throughout Adelaide and for developing the rosery, the experimental garden and the hot house at the Botanical Gardens. He spoke and wrote widely on the importance of forests for their effect on climate as well as for their economic value to the growing colony.

Finally, let's look at St George. He does not carry a bible and has not been identified as a preacher, but he was a devout Christian. Although St George is the Patron Saint of England, he never stepped foot in that country. He was born in Cappadocia in the third century to Christian parents. Although he is depicted in a knight's armour, he was actually a Roman soldier. It is said that in the year 303 the Emperor Diocletian had him cruelly tortured to make him deny his faith in Christ. George showed incredible courage and faith and was finally beheaded for his Christian belief.

But the window of St George is also in memory of Canon Wilfred George Martin Murphy, who was rector of All Souls' Parish for twenty years, during the construction of this church and the following growth of the parish. We know he preached the Word of God and worked tirelessly for the future of his Parish. The small image of All Souls' Church in the corner of his window acknowledges this work. His abhorrence of "inferior glass" in churches resulted in a legacy of, to paraphrase him, "beautiful works of art that are peculiarly precious and have attracted people here by their beauty".

He believed that only in churches would memorials, such as our stained-glass windows, be respected and maintained. He also believed (prophesied) that monuments and memorials in secular buildings would eventually be resented and ultimately removed.

"A picture is worth a thousand words" so the saying goes. Our windows are the picture storybooks that tell of prophets and poets, pilgrims and puritans, painters, planters and priests (among others) who have trusted in and lived by the Word of God and spoken God's Word, often at great risk to themselves.

May the Words, actions and sacrifices of the prophets of all ages encourage us, now and in future generations, to daily go in peace to love and serve the Lord.