

# Prophets in our midst

*The Anglican Board of Mission and the Anglicare Movement  
Preaching at All Souls St Peter's Advent 3 Sunday 15 December 2024  
Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20; A Song of Isaiah; Philippians 4: 4-7  
Luke 3: 7 - 18*

## Introduction

Noisy and Joyful greetings as you consider the Advent theme 'prophets in our midst'. Thank you, David, for inviting me to speak today on this theme, with reference to the work of the Anglican Board of Mission and AnglicareSA. The tradition of the Prophets looms large in this season. We hear of their for-telling of the one who is to come, who will bring to bear the justice of God, especially for the poor and oppressed. We hear warnings that to neglect the least is ultimately damaging for the whole of the community, rich and poor alike. Hard words to hear, then as now.

The prophets also tend to be very noisy, and this often annoyed their hearers. Today, Gaudete Sunday, means 'rejoice', and usually such rejoicing is very noisy. We are encouraged by the prophet Zephaniah to make a joyful noise, to sing aloud, to rejoice and exalt. Do not fear, Zephaniah says, for God is near at hand. There will be no disaster; God will gather the lame and the outcast and turn their shame to praise. The prophet Isaiah joins the noisy chorus with a refrain: God is my strength and my song: shout and sing for joy.

The letter to the Philippians harmonises: rejoice always, again rejoice! Come with prayers of supplication and thanksgiving. Bring them to God, and God's peace, surpassing understanding, will guard us in mind and heart. At last a moment of peace, but no.....

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist seems to be having a bad hair day. John calls the crowds who come to be baptised a brood of vipers! It is as if he were saying, I want more from you than your writhing fear of judgement and wrath. (It's always about me, isn't it?) John exhorts the crowd: bear fruit worthy of repentance and don't rest on your laurels as the ones already favoured by God. What should we do? the crowd asks. John's reply is simple and disarming: if you have two coats give one away. If you have enough food for two, don't eat it all but share with those who have none. (Oops – pointing to my girth!).

Even to the tax collectors and the soldiers who protect the rule of law – just or otherwise, the ones we sometimes love to hate, John says, do what you do fairly and be satisfied with what you have.

As we consider the Advent theme ‘prophets in our midst’ we confront the daily reality of social inequity and global injustice and its myriads of forms. We are surrounded by so many inconvenient and uncomfortable truths, all competing for our attention. I don’t need to tell you what they are, you know well and perhaps we are sick and tired of hearing about them, hearing all the noise and clamour for more where there is less.

We are often either reformers or resisters when it comes to social change, depending on the issue. We are used to hearing different points of view, especially perhaps in the Anglican church, where if you get two Anglicans together you are likely to have at least three opinions.!

So how do we discern the prophets in our midst? Let me share some stories...

From 1991 to 1997 I worked with Ecumenical Housing, a ministry of the Victorian Council of Churches, with the aim of increasing affordable social housing through a partnership with the State Government, using vacant church land to build such housing on a 25-year lease. During those years, over 250 units of housing resulted, and most have continued to provide affordable housing in parish sites.

One of the people I had occasion to meet during these years was Tim Costello, the brother of Peter Costello a former Federal Treasurer. Both brothers came from a dynamic Salvation Army household. Tim indicated once that dinner table conversation was often very dynamic. While Peter engaged in a formal political career, Tim did his politics outside of government. As a Baptist Minister, Tim was one of several Melbourne Baptist leaders who pushed for social change, to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor, to reduce homelessness and increase access to decent, secure and affordable housing

As the Minister of the St Kilda Baptist Church, Tim, who had also trained in law, offered free legal advice to homeless people and prostitutes in the area. I also recall attending rallies organised by Tim against the building of Crown Casino in Melbourne and the proliferation of Poker Machines.

At one meeting I attended with Tim present he told the story of a conversation with his ten-year-old son who had overheard some adults speaking about his dad. His son asked, hey dad, why are people saying that you are pathetic? Tim laughed of course, because the word they used was somewhat different: prophetic. Tim is one of those people who can be seen as a prophet in our midst, from a national and even international perspective. Tim was for a time the CEO and Chief Advocate for World Vision Australia. Tim's prophetic ministry has been widely recognised, including being listed by the National Trust as a 'National Living Treasure' and being awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Australian Catholic University for his 'contributions to religious life and social justice.' (Not bad for a Baptist!)

### The Anglican Board of Mission

The Anglican Board of Mission celebrates its 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2025. Its early foundation in 1850 arose through the missionary zeal of Bishop George Selwyn, the first Bishop of Aotearoa New Zealand. Soon enough the Australian Bishops came on board and together they formed the Melanesian Mission. ABM was formed as the official mission agency of Church of England in Australia, as it was then known. An early work of the Melanesian Mission was the construction of a 100-ton schooner, the 'Southern Cross' to transport everything from Bibles and other books to materials to build homes for the missionary priests, teachers, doctors and nurses who would work in the Melanesian Islands. 175 years later, the 'Southern Cross Mark 20' does a similar work, connecting the Melanesian Islands with the rest of the world.

### Frank Coaldrake

As the Anglican Board of Mission developed, so did its missionary reach in other communities, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. Among the leaders of ABM in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, was Frank Coaldrake. Born in Brisbane, Frank studied philosophy in the University of Queensland in the 1930s and was heavily involved in the National Union of Australian Students and the Australian Student Christian Movement.

Frank became a convinced pacifist and in 1939 worked in Melbourne with Fr Gerard Kennedy Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence,

working as a community worker in inner-city Fitzroy. Frank was ordained deacon, then priest during World War II and in 1946 he was appointed as the Chairman of the Australian Board of Missions, as ABM was then known.

During this time Frank studied Japanese in the University of Sydney and in 1947 he moved to Japan to work with the Japanese Episcopal Church, which had been demoralised during the war, with 71 out of 246 churches being destroyed. (Did we know that there were that many churches in Japan?) Frank remained with his wife Maida in Japan until 1956, after which he once again became Chairman of ABM. During his time as Chairman, in 1967, he persuaded ABM to abandon the goal of assimilation of Aborigines, and to pursue the principle of acceptance. A significant move, given the successful referendum to give Aboriginal people the vote in the same year.

On 10 July 1970, Frank Coaldrake was the first Australian born priest to be elected Archbishop, for the Diocese of Brisbane. However, he died before he was consecrated.

### Joan Durdin

Joan Durdin, born in Adelaide in 1922, and still with us at age 102, is best known as the author of the book 'They became Nurses: A History of Nursing in South Australia 1836 to 1980'. Joan's work as a nurse educator included ten years teaching at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, followed by six years as a nurse educator in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s. During Joan's time in PNG, Joan began the process of training locals to be nurses rather than sending missionary nurses from overseas, which had been the practice until then. Joan later became a nursing historian. Joan is commemorated by the Annual Joan Durdin Oration, University of Adelaide, and the recipient of the Frank Coaldrake Award by ABM. Joan is renowned for her personal attributes of tact, diplomacy, tenacity of purpose, insight and calmness in adversity.

### The Anglicare Movement in Australia

Earlier this year, as my first post-retirement project, I wrote a historical overview of Anglicare Australia. The Anglicare movement as it could be described is a movement unique to Australia. The historical roots begin with individual initiatives in each diocese across the Australian church. As these initiatives grew, and as agencies advocated for government funding,

their success led to greater professionalisation alongside a particular sense of being connected to the church from which they originated.

While the name 'Anglicare Australia' only came to light in 1997, a national agency network began in 1983. I have been a part of this network since that time, which gave me some insight into the history, because I am part of the history! At the time, I was working as a social worker at St Mark's Parish Fitzroy, with the initial support for this work coming from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, also based in Fitzroy. St Mark's Community Centre, now a partnership with Anglicare Victoria still provides emergency assistance and access to other service for low-income people in and around Fitzroy.

Historically the Anglicare Australia movement draws on the longer history of the Diocesan based agencies which now associate with it, some dating back to the mid-1800s.

#### AnglicareSA

What we now know as AnglicareSA is one case in point, and its historical development tells us a lot about how much things have changed in the way we approach social need and opportunities for social advancement, especially for people who are poor, homeless or in crisis for a whole range of reasons.

#### Julia Farr

Mrs Julia Farr is often seen as the person associated with the first Anglican response to social need in South Australia, and she is renowned for other good works besides. On 3 July 1860 a meeting was hosted at the home of Julia and Henry Farr, Henry being the Headmaster of the Collegiate School of St Peter. The purpose of the meeting was to consider the situation of orphan girls who were living at the Government Asylum in Kintore Avenue, in the same building where the criminally insane were housed.

At this meeting it was considered that there was a need for a church run Orphan Home to be established, and this took place a year later in Carrington Street Adelaide, with the establishment later being known as Farr House. While it is not certain who attended the meeting held on 3 July 1860, the Management Committee was almost entirely composed of women. Bishop Short was to be the Visitor, Lady MacDonnell, wife of the Governor was Patroness, and the members would include Mrs Short, Mrs

Farr, Mrs Hughes, Mrs Hall and Mrs Prankard. There was also a visiting clergyman, RS Jackson of St John's Halifax Street and Dr Moore a consulting physician. They were all Anglicans.

Other Anglican caring initiatives followed, each with their own management committee, each with enthusiastic fundraising in a time before government funding. This included St Mary's House of Mercy, for women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, a matter of great shame at the time, with women provided with care during their confinement and the requirement that their children be offered for adoption through the Orphan Home. There was no such thing as single parenthood at the time.

Flora Joy MacLennan

Another name that comes to mind is Flora Joy MacLennan, who gained her licentiate in theology in 1935 and later trained as a social worker. Having worked for the Adelaide City Council and then the Victorian Government to establish better social work practice, Joy did what she finally felt called to do and that was to work through the Anglican Church. In 1947, Joy was appointed as the first social worker employed by the Diocese, continuing in this role until 1975.

Joy worked with others to establish the first residential aged care home, Brig House, in Grange. Joy and others brought together the various management committees which existed in childcare, support for vulnerable women and aged care, as well as the beginnings of social housing through the Laura and Alfred West Cottage Homes. Joy could see that things were changing and that the approach needed to be different.

Greater professionalism came with government funding and in 1975 the Family Law Act meant that single parenthood was well and truly on our social agenda. In that same year, the approach to working with vulnerable women became known as the Family Support Service. Joy and others pushed for greater coordination of Anglican run services, and Anglican Community Services, now AnglicareSA was the result.

The Church as a Prophetic Community

While it seems that much of what I have shared with you today sounds a bit like a history lesson, I hasten to add that this is as much an object lesson in what it means to be a 'prophet in our midst'. Like the prophets of old,

people like Frank Coaldrake, Joan Durdin, Julia Farr and Joy MacLennan engaged in prophetic work to change things for the better in their time and place.

This is not to say that we would do the same thing now. Social expectations and a greater focus on human rights following World War II have significantly impacted on how the common good is understood. While these people could be seen as prophets, the truth of the matter is that they never worked alone. They always worked through organizations, and they inspired organizational change.

When I moved to Adelaide to become the Manager of The Magdalene Centre in 1998, I was struck by the way the Mission of The Magdalene Centre was described. 'The Magdalene Centre is a prophetic community which through service, connects the lives of poor and marginalised people in the city with the life of the church'. I am aware that the term 'prophetic community' was suggested by David Richardson, a former Dean of our Cathedral.

The idea of the church as a 'prophetic community' is an interesting one. While I have focused on some prophetic individuals today, the reality is that all these individuals connected with, and in a sense dependent on, many others who are captivated by their vision and their practice, who support the work they do in both prayer and action, who provide the funding to make their prophetic work possible. The work of organizations such as ABM and AnglicareSA, whether they receive government funding or not, always has a voluntary aspect, where a prophetic vision is shared.

Often in the life of the church at the parish level, we often dress ourselves down. All we see decline and ageing and a lack of sustainability. We see ourselves sometimes as a 'pathetic community' to use a phrase from Tim Costello's son. Instead, we need to nurture a vision of ourselves as a prophetic community, proclaiming God's justice, living out of the reality that in the Christ, the One who came and is yet still to come, is the very source of our life, our hope and our sustainability as a community of faith and action.

Like anything that has to do with Advent, we are called to watch and to wait, to see what might just be round the corner for us as individuals and as a

community, what repentance and adaptation may be necessary to become who we are into the future.

## Conclusion

As I conclude, it is important to say, on behalf of both the Anglican Board of Mission and AnglicareSA, a word of recognition and thanks for the way you have already enabled such bodies within our church to be, with us, prophetic communities of God's love hope and justice (ABM); for justice, respect and fullness of life for all (AnglicareSA)

I am aware that there are several parish members who regularly support ABM and there have been recent times when All Souls have collectively supported a particular ABM project. I am also aware that All Souls is a regular supporter of The Magdalene Centre, including, most recently, the provision of 18 Christmas Hampers. This is what I call an expression of a prophetic community, a sign that God's justice is coming.

Let us, together, and noisily, rejoice and be glad. Amen.

*Peter Burke*