



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday of Advent

readings: [Malachi 3 1-4](#), [Philippians 1 3-11](#), [Luke 3 1-6](#)

5th December 2021

Last Sunday, the 1st Sunday of Advent, I received my first Christmas card. Kindly sent by a member of the congregation (who shall remain nameless, but he knows who he is!), it was very cleverly chosen to weave together the themes of Christmas, Advent, and the snow that was falling heavily last Sunday. It featured an image of *four garden forks*, plunged deep into the snow, with each one topped by a burning candle. It had the caption “*Four Candles*” (a phrase which I know I need to pronounce very carefully, as lovers of the famous Two Ronnies sketch will know).

So inspired by this, I want to begin by offering a preamble: call it ‘a preamble to the candle’, if you will.

For today we light the 2nd of the 4 Advent Candles: each candle linked to the lectionary readings for Advent and representing those looking forward to the coming of Christ recalled on Christmas Day when we will light the 5th candle.

Last week, on the first Sunday of the Advent season, with its apocalyptic theme and its focus on the hope of all God’s people who look *forward* to the Second Coming of Christ, we were also encouraged to look *back* to the First Coming, to his incarnation at Bethlehem. And on each succeeding Sunday we look through the lens of those who waited for his coming the first time round, the coming of the Messiah, those who prophesied and patiently prepared the people for his coming, those who trusted in faith that he would eventually come: the OT prophets (our theme today), John the Baptist, who looms large during Advent as the messenger and forerunner, appearing in both this week’s and next week’s gospel readings (but I don’t wish to queer the pitch for next week’s preacher), and on the 4th Sunday of Advent we focus on Mary.

Today’s candle is sometimes known as “the prophets’ candle”: recalling the prophets who waited in hope for the Messiah’s arrival. Prophets who preached repentance and preparation, prophets who preached the Word, persistent whether the time was favourable or unfavourable, determined to convince, rebuke, exhort. Prophets such as Isaiah and Micah, Zechariah & Malachi, Elijah and Elisha: we tend to think of prophets, along with the patriarchs, as old men with grizzled grey beards from a long time ago. So in the interests of gender balance, let us not forget Miriam and Sarah, Huldah and Hannah, Deborah and Esther: Esther about whom Simon Taylor has recently written a powerful and enlightening Grove booklet about the topical relevance of her message for ministry in difficult times: “For Just Such a Time as This”.¹

But there are non-stereotypical prophets in our own age too: think Greta Thunberg, aged 18, and all the young people who are leading the fight against our wilful despoiling and destruction of our planet; think Christian Murray-Leslie, retired hospital consultant and charity director from Melbourne in S Derbyshire, a Christian in every sense, who felt a moral duty to protest against climate change, to prophesy that “our failure to act now is to be complicit in genocide”, so he sat down on the M25, and got ink poured over him by an irate motorist plus a criminal record at age 77 as a result.

Prophets old and new can come in many shapes and sizes, from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their calling and work can take many forms; their message is a deeply personal one, often delivered at great personal cost. Prophesying can be a lonely business, standing on the margins of society. But prophets can offer powerful ‘messages from the margins’. Simon and Garfunkel in their 1960s folk song *The Sound of Silence* illustrated it well when they sang: “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls”. For often from graffitied walls and chanted slogans of protest, from unlikely voices on margins set far from society’s conventional structures, can come powerful and prophetic words.

However, 'telling it as it is', attacking the status quo, challenging authority, speaking out against injustice and immoral behaviour, and warning of impending national and global disaster, can leave you being ostracised, threatened and vulnerable. And it often doesn't end well: Elijah fleeing for his life, John the Baptist losing his head, Jesus going to the Cross.

At the apex of the prophetic line, and the exemplar for all those who come after, stands of course Jesus: announcing the Kingdom and dying in order to bring it about. In spite of singing hymns like "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" with its line "Jesus: my shepherd, brother, friend; My prophet, priest and king", we often tend to downplay the characterisation of Jesus as prophet.

Yet it was above all as such, that people of his time saw him; it was how he on occasion described himself and also how the synoptic gospel writers often portrayed him. His embodiment of God's word, his personal sense of calling, his symbolic actions in cleansing the Temple and at the Last Supper, even his journey to Jerusalem, his rejection and death at the hands of the authorities there and his foretelling of it, (for prophets knew they had to go to Jerusalem, to the centre of temporal and spiritual power, to be really heard, but by so doing they knew they were hastening their death)...all these are prophetic characteristics.

Tom Wright in his seminal book "Jesus and the Victory of God"² identifies two sorts of prophet: leadership prophets and oracular prophets. The former sought to initiate and lead liberation movements which would lead to salvation; the latter uttered warnings of impending doom which would stimulate repentance. John the Baptist had begun to fuse these two categories together in what Wright has described as 'a new and explosive combination', not only through dire warnings of "valleys filled and mountains and hills made low, crooked paths made straight and rough places plain", but in symbolic gestures of wilderness and baptism to signify needed repentance.

He was the forerunner, laying a foundation for Jesus who not only announced a prophetic message, and proclaimed it in parables, but also inaugurated a renewal movement which persists to this day. Of course Jesus was more than just a prophet: the stories he told, the actions he took, made it clear that his work as Messiah was not only to bring Israel's long prophetic history to its climax, but to bring salvation to all, and to inaugurate the Kingdom of God.

Speaking 20 years later³, Tom Wright argues that to continue the advancement of the Kingdom, the Church, as the body of Christ in the world today, must reclaim its prophetic role in society. It must recognise its 'dangerous vocation' (his words) to speak truth to power, to stand confidently in the public square, to hold those in authority to account where they have patently been found wanting. It needs to recapture the art of Spirit-led critique, commentary and even prophecy.

Prophecy points to the potential for tragedy if its warnings are not heeded...but it also offers hope. Like the prophets' candle flame in the darkness, it may flicker and dim, but that hope, our Advent hope in Christ, will never be extinguished.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain**

1. Simon J Taylor: *'For Just Such a Time as This: Learning from Esther for Ministry in Difficult Times'* (Cambridge, Grove Books P165, 2021)
2. N T Wright: *'Jesus and the Victory of God'*, (London, SPCK,1996)
3. N T Wright: *'The Dangerous Vocations: Church, Media and Public Life in a Post-Rational World'*
Address given at Church's Media Network Conference, London, 20 October 2016
<https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/10/21/the-dangerous-vocations-church-media-and-public-life-in-a-post-rational-world/>