

## Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent 2023

Isaiah 53:1-6 (the suffering servant) and  
Luke 4:14-19 (the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy).

On this second Sunday of advent we traditionally consider the role of the Prophets, that group of men (mostly) and occasionally women who spoke out the word of God to the community of God's people.

I suppose it's also the Sunday to trot out the old joke,

My prophecy class was cancelled,  
due to unforeseen circumstances.

(Does anyone need me to explain that joke??)

Prophecy is an attractive notion. The thought that someone might know the future. In 2002 there was a Steven Spielberg / Tom Cruise film called Minority Report.

Set in the distant future they had been able to create a system where three women had visions of the future and they were able to prevent crimes from happening. People were arrested for a crime they hadn't yet committed.

Question. If it was possible to know the future, would you want to?? Let's discuss that afterwards over coffee.

Some prophecies are very specific and very short term and the prophet needs no special gift.

Katherine might say "Don't try and lift that you'll hurt your back," followed 20 seconds later by "I told you not to try and lift that, now you've hurt your back".

In the bible we have examples of prophecy that were very specific. Jesus was in Jerusalem and his disciples were marvelling at the temple and Jesus spoke about the time to come when the temple would be utterly destroyed; not one stone standing on another. It happened in AD 70.

I read recently that the fire in the temple caused the precious metals to melt and the soldiers prised away the stones to get at the metal...literally, no stones were left standing.

On a very frequent basis the prophets were warning Israel about slipping away from God's safe boundaries and good ways. Listen to this poetry from Hosea, speaking to a people who followed the worship rituals, but they were empty and meaningless.

6 'O Ephraim, how shall I deal with you?  
How shall I deal with you, O Judah?  
7 'Your love for me is like the morning mist,  
like the dew that goes early away.  
9 'For loyalty is my desire and not sacrifice,  
and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.'

These words from Hosea were written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BEFORE Christ, but are still applicable today. If our worship is to be acceptable and meaningful it has to be reflected in the 99.4% of our lives we live outside of the church building.

Most often we think of prophecy as something that is to occur in the future. We heard read one of the four servant songs in the book of Isaiah – we heard the fourth.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

It didn't take Christians long to realise that Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah had said about the one to come who would bring forgiveness and a new relationship with God.

When these words were heard by the Jews in exile in Babylon They had a powerful impact directly into their situation.

Isaiah told them that God would gather his people together again and bring them home. The prophecies also told of someone taking all their punishment and setting them free from the old cycle of slipping away from God, being punished, coming back to God...slipping away from God.

God would restore the nation. God would lift from them the punishment they feared. They would be renewed and re-established. And it happened. They did return. They rebuilt the temple and Christ did come.

During communion I've chosen the Father's Song. It's a simple worship song based on the prophecy of Zephaniah and it speaks in the most tender way, of God restoring his people and singing over them – like a lullaby.

So prophecy meant something to those who heard it, it brought hope and purpose and a vision of what would come and prophecy is only seen to be fulfilled when those things happen.

We should be open to the word of prophecy ourselves, but with suitable holy caution otherwise we can be manipulated.

I'm re-listening to the Last Kingdom series of books by Bernard Cornwell, the series about Uhtred of Bebbenburg and King Alfred the Great.

In the second book Uhtred is back in his beloved Northumberland and has encountered a manipulative clergyman who claims that

St. Cuthbert has spoken to him in a vision and of course what Cuthbert said happened to serve the clergyman's purpose.

It's just a story I know but it's a valuable lesson. If someone claims to have an insight from God to the future, it's only right we test what is said and treat it with a respectful and holy caution...not disbelieving, but showing wisdom.

And prophecy may not be heard in the form you expect. In the Old Testament it is often set out as poetry or prose, just like the passage from Isaiah that Jesus read in Nazareth.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Jesus read those words and then claimed that he was the fulfilment of them.

But the prophecy we hear is more likely to be someone speaking from the heart who is feeling frustrated or annoyed or puzzled as to why no-one else seems to see what they feel and perceive.

Listening to someone who is challenging the direction we are going in or the plans we are making is important. They might just be the voice we need to pay attention too.

Or it may be that something prophetic occurs and something has a deeper significance. Like this Key.

We've been enjoying the wonderful work done on the external doors of the church all of which has been made possible through a legacy we received, and our South Porch doors were re-fitted on Friday.

The locksmith at the firm made this key for us and repaired the ancient lock. The door was first installed in 1887. We've checked – we don't have any other keys for that door, just this new one.

We don't actually need this key. There's a modern lock on the door and the keyholders all have a key for it.

In conversation, we realised it would be a highly symbolic thing to unlock and open the newly refurbished church after Transforming Trinity is complete. A celebration service with the Bishop and so on.

A new key in the old lock.

New structures in the old church.

A new key made specifically for the old lock, just as the new structures are specifically for the old church.

This key is a symbol and a sign to us of the project going ahead and the work being done. A key we didn't need is a promise of things to come.

Today we can trust the promises God has made to his people through the ages. In Advent we give thanks for the promises made and the promises fulfilled, for Christ did come and will come again. We echo the Advent prayer – Come Lord Jesus.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 10 December 2023