

Here we are on the second Sunday of Advent, just 19 days before we gather either virtually or in the flesh, to celebrate the wonderful news about the birth of Jesus Christ. If you have been watching our daily mini videos during the past week you will have noted in the background, the one lit candle reminding us of the people from the very beginning who first hear from and respond to God.

On each of the next five days our series of mini videos will continue by focussing on a group of individuals known as the Prophets, designated by the lighting of the second Advent candle.

At its simplest, Prophets were men and women called by God at different times and in different circumstances to truthfully and accurately impart what God wanted to say to his People. Without exception they had a heart for God above and beyond anything else; they were anointed with the Holy Spirit and possessed the courage and faithfulness to not only speak out about what God planned to do in the future – which is where the word prophecy comes from – but also, how people ought to respond to God.

And, depending on which authority you turn to, there are between 300 and 500 prophecies cited in the Old Testament which can be directly or indirectly linked to Jesus as the Messiah. In this week's videos we shall see an example of a prophecy from Micah predicting Bethlehem as Jesus' birthplace.

Also, we will see how one of the great Prophets, Isaiah, foretells the virgin birth; the many names which will be associated with the Messiah, including Immanuel which means God with us and how the Messiah will assume the role of a suffering servant.

Micah and Isaiah both lived over 700 years before Christ's birth but there came a period of 400 years before Christ was born when no-one spoke as a prophet; the Holy Spirit was absent. Yet, the gospel writers make it clear that the Holy Spirit was active at Jesus' birth, at his baptism and temptation.

And the work of the HS was not exclusive to Jesus, as we shall hear in our later advent videos, the Spirit was at work in others such as John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah. Indeed, next week, the third candle will be lit in recognition of John the Baptist's pivotal role as the New Testament Prophet proclaiming Jesus' Messiahship.

There is ample evidence in the Gospels that the masses saw in the words and actions of Jesus, convincing evidence that Jesus was also a Prophet in the style of many OT Prophets; indeed, the Samaritan woman at the well referred to him as such. But today's Gospel passage shows Jesus to be more than just a Prophet.

During our visit to the Holy Land last year we visited a living museum in Nazareth where life in a first century town has been re-created, including a synagogue.

There, as we sat in the positions Jesus' listeners would have sat, our guide gave a spellbinding performance of Jesus in today's Gospel narrative. He made it absolutely clear that Jesus Christ was not merely proclaiming good news - he was the good news!

The word Christ literally means 'anointed one' and here Jesus reads the very words from the scroll written by Isaiah “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor”.

Jesus, in the synagogue, on a Sabbath day, uses an Old Testament prophecy to explain both himself

and the nature of salvation that God is bringing through him. I say that because if you look at the Isaiah reading in full you will see that Jesus ends at verse 2, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour – Old Testament speak for the time when salvation was to be proclaimed in what would have been called the Messianic age.

Whilst Isaiah predicted primarily the liberation of Israel from the future Babylonian captivity, Jesus proclaimed liberation from sin and all its consequences. We do not know if Jesus chose the Isaiah passage to read out or if it was simply the set reading for that day, but it speaks clearly of the Messiah's ministry to meet the needs of the poor, the blind, the prisoners and the oppressed.

When the Old Testament Prophets spoke, they spoke with the full authority of God. Often though, their truthful and faithful proclamations were not what people wanted to hear and they suffered rejection, were frequently ostracized and sometimes even put to death.

Immediately after where our passage ends Jesus tells his listeners 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. Those of you who know the story well will remember that initially the listeners are bowled over by what Jesus says, but then they turn against him for being nothing more than a local nobody trying to make himself out to be something big.

Prophet? More like a false Prophet and they reject Jesus entirely and set out to throw him to his death off a cliff top.

Only, of course, they fail. We read that he simply walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Luke does not explain whether the escape was miraculous or simply the result of Jesus' commanding presence. In any case, his time to die had not yet come.

That time would be his crucifixion, and it is interesting to note that a little later in Luke 11, Jesus speaks of the blood of all the Prophets which had been spilled. No doubt he not only had in mind the recent bloody beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist but also prophetically the spilling of his own blood on the cross.

Prophetic voices have often been rejected throughout history. This rejection was something Jesus foretold would also happen to his followers so that begs the question - Where are the prophetic voices in our lives and in our world today? What is their message? Are we inclined to accept or reject it?

In closing, I'd invite you to reflect for a moment on Jesus' own understanding of his mission. When I did so earlier, I couldn't but help look at our world as we struggle with so many social issues: the welcome of refugees and migrants to our country and communities, the growing inequality between those who have and those who have not, the destruction of the environment.

It raised the question in my mind, what is the Spirit of the Lord prompting me to do, as a follower of Jesus? You might wish to ask the same question yourself. My prayer is that we all receive the grace to firstly hear the call, not to be deaf to it and whatever the call might be, that we have the strength and commitment to carry it out with great generosity.