

## The Prophetic Voice

Today's first reading from Jeremiah raises questions about prophets - how do we really know if what they are saying really is from God or not and how do we know if they in fact are a prophet among them. This reading from Jeremiah is actually only a portion of the wider exchange between Jeremiah and Hananiah that happened between the time of the two invasions by the Babylonians into Judah. In the first invasion, Nebuchadnezzar took the Temple vessels as well as the elite of the Israelite society back to Babylon. Hananiah was prophesying that the Israelites would prevail and the vessels and those who were taken away would return within two years and the Babylonians would be defeated. Jeremiah reminded Hananiah that up until then, the prophets prophesized about war and destruction and famine and basically, hard times. Jeremiah wished that the prophesy of peace was true, but he knew that it would not be the case, even though Hananiah was providing hope to the Israelites and only telling them what they wanted to hear. So, what makes a prophet? First, we must distinguish between a Biblical prophet and a predictor of the future or a seer.

The Biblical prophets arose at the time when Israel had a king. The prophets were people who were sent by God to deliver God's message to the people. The prophet was a kind of moral conscience of the people, pointing out how the people have veered from following the ways of God. This was the major task of the prophet - to let the people know that they were not following God's ways and that God was unhappy about that. Most of the messages that the prophets delivered from God followed a similar formula: God was angry over what the people were doing. God wanted them to repent and go back to following God's

ways. If they did not, then they would be punished by God. If the people did repent and change their ways, then God would not punish them. An example of God's punishment being held back is in the book of Jonah when the Ninevites repented. The people of Nineveh repented of their sins and God decided not to destroy the city, much to Jonah's disappointment. However, if the people did not repent, then God's punishment could take several forms. In Jeremiah's time, God's punishment was the exiling the Israelites to Babylon. The prophets could not just say anything they wanted just to make the people happy. If they tried this, then their prophecies, like those of Hananiah would not come true. Jeremiah is reminding the people that traditionally, the prophetic voice was one of punishment, not salvation. The prophets kept the word of God before the people especially when the king turned away from God and sinned.

People can still have a prophetic voice today. But we still must ask ourselves whether or not the person is really carrying the mantle of a prophet or if they are just trying to stir up trouble, putting a monkey-wrench into the system; or looking for some kind of personal profit. The prophetic voice today can be heard in many different ways and in regard to many different issues. Human rights issues, environmental issues and animal rights issues are just some of the major categories where the prophetic voice has been used. While it is easy to talk and listen about these issues in general terms, difficulties arise when it gets down to specifics. For example, it is generally accepted that all people are created equal. This is even stated in our nation's constitution. But as was our national experience over the last 225 years, exactly who is equal is debated and as time goes on that list changes. Poverty and homelessness are other issues many have spoken out about. But when people start talking specifics about wealth distribution or

building low-income housing, people become unwilling to share their wealth thinking that they don't have that much or they take the NIMBY attitude - "Not in my Backyard!" in terms of housing. Prophetic voices can be heard speaking out against atrocities being committed by governments such as ethnic cleansing; withholding food supplies from those opposed to the government. Unfortunately, when one speaks out against one's government using the prophetic voice, their reception is the same as it was in Jeremiah's time - they are ridiculed and ways are sought to silence that prophetic voice.

The purpose of the prophetic voice is the same today as it was in Jeremiah's time: a call to repentance and turning back to the ways of God. But how do we know if the person talking today is Hananiah or Jeremiah? Are today's prophets speaking God's word; or are they giving the people a false hope, just telling them what they want to hear; or are they looking for a benefit to themselves? Even in more general terms, are those pastors who proclaim a theology of prosperity speaking God's Word or are they preying on people's faith for their own benefit? To answer this, we need to set what they are saying against what it says in the Bible and our understanding of the Bible. Is their message consistent with the Bible and especially what Jesus teaches? If it isn't, then they are probably not speaking prophetically.

For many generations, religion had been suppressed in public discussions and the prophetic voice had been lost or largely silenced. However, in the last generation or so, religion has taken a more public profile, speaking out against injustices as well as informing and helping to form public opinion. Not all that has been said or will be said can be considered prophetic, as coming from God. We need to weigh what is being said against the teachings of Jesus and the rest of

our Biblical tradition. If we see that the words are prophetic, then we should hear the words with open hearts and minds, being willing to be led by the Holy Spirit to change our ways, heed the prophetic words and do God's Will. If we don't heed the truly prophetic words and instead prefer to hear the 'feel good' words that give us false hope, then we are bound to follow in the footsteps of those who listened to Hananiah's words over Jeremiah's words.

In the Gospel reading, we heard the last of the instructions that Jesus gave to the apostles as He was sending them out for their first mission trip. After hearing the words of caution the last couple of weeks in the Gospel, today's words are more reassuring to the apostles. Jesus is also reminding the apostles, that like the prophets sent by God before them, they are being sent by Jesus to do God's work and it is for the glory of God that they are spreading the Good News. Jesus is also subtly telling the apostles that they should not be concerned about converting the masses, but it is in the small gestures that show a person is looking outward towards others are most reflective of God's love for the world.

As Jeremiah experienced, it takes the guidance of the Holy Spirit to have the courage to use the prophetic voice to speak out against the powers that be when those powers are abusing that power. May those who are called to speak God's truth be sustained to continue to call for returning to God's ways and may we who hear those words have ears to follow them.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: [https://youtu.be/Qp6P\\_Spabn4](https://youtu.be/Qp6P_Spabn4)

Service: <https://youtu.be/1nwxX1GUJ08>