

R. Young - Jan 29th 2012 – Candlemass

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5 Heb 2:14-end Luke 2:22-40

Theme: Prophecy

Aims: To explore the work of the Holy Spirit in prophecy,
then and now

I wonder, does any one have a birthday on Feb 2nd this week?
If so, you were born on a very important day!..
Because it's a day on which many things have been celebrated (and
your birthday joins them).

Feb 2nd seems to have a special significance that has attracted
celebrations over the centuries.

Going back to pre-Christian times, this time of year is celebrated as
being half way between the shortest day and the Spring equinox, the
midpoint of winter; literally a time when light begins to shine more
brightly than darkness as the days get longer.

And did you know that it's the day when some cultures predicted
weather patterns? Farmers believed that the remainder of winter
would be the opposite of whatever the weather was like on February
2nd.

In America and Canada it's called Groundhog Day.
A groundhog is a woodchuck or marmot, the largest member of the
squirrel family. If it is cloudy when a groundhog emerges from its
burrow on this day, it will leave the burrow, signifying that winter-

like weather will soon end. If it is sunny, the groundhog will
supposedly see its shadow and retreat back into its burrow, and the
winter weather will continue for six more weeks

And of course, Groundhog Day is a 1993 American comedy film;
about a weather man who has to live the same day over and over
again...

Finally, in the Church we call it Candlemas, and we're celebrating it
today, on a Sunday, rather than on Thursday later this week.
It's a festival of light that was established by the 11th century, when
beeswax candles that are to be used in the church the coming year
are blessed. A procession is accompanied by the words we've just
heard Simeon say in our gospel reading, the Nunc Dimittis as it's
called, with its reference to 'the light to lighten the Gentiles'.

So in folklore it's all about light and making predictions.
It's all about prophecy.

In the church on this day however, we celebrate predictions that
were a little different. The prophecies we celebrate were made by
the presence of the Holy Spirit working in some remarkable people's
lives.

We heard from three prophets this morning, in our Old Testament
and Gospel readings: from Malachi, Simeon and Anna.

First of all, Malachi.

Malachi is a Hebrew word that means 'my messenger'.

It's a short book which addresses some of the complaints that the
Israelites had about life, to God.

It consists of six disputes between the people and God, which the prophet brokers.

And our reading today comes from the fourth of these.

The people asked, where is the God of justice?

Why are evil people prosper and getting away with it? !

The prophet's response is to say that God is about to act decisively, by sending a messenger to prepare for his coming. The messenger will first of all bring about a purification of the rituals held in the Temple (vv 3, 4): "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will purify the descendants of Levi...until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness".

The second thing that will happen is that God will come in judgement against all those who do not follow his moral code – against sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, who oppress hired workers or widows or orphans or those who are aliens in the land.

Who is this messenger that Malachi speaks of?

Well, chapter 4 introduces Elijah as the possible answer – he would come as a forerunner of the great and terrible day of the Lord.

And of course, Matthew in his Gospel, interprets the messenger to be John the Baptist.

Our second prophet is Simeon. Simeon as quoted by Luke.

Now then, both Simeon and Anna were devout Jews, who it appears were both on the lookout for the Messiah, as many were. And Jews who were on the lookout for the Messiah would often go to the Scriptures for hints as to how they were to recognise him.

Simeon (and Luke, of course) had grasped that this baby Jesus *was* the promised Messiah.

Simeon was obviously someone gifted with the Holy Spirit, because three times the Spirit is mentioned as the instigator of Simeon's actions.

Simeon had also grasped that Jesus would be 'a light to the Gentiles' – something gleaned from the prophet Isaiah – and that his life would be like a sword that would pierce his mother Mary's heart.

And thirdly, there is Anna; a lady of great age and with much wisdom.

She, too, had been looking for the Messiah. And "she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child, to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel". In other words, to all those other Jews who were on the look out for the Messiah.

Luke was writing his Gospel about 80 years later, and he knew that the coming of the Messiah wasn't going to be easy. In his writing he warns people that it wasn't going to be as they expected; that it would involve suffering and death, which is what happens when the kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of the world.

There would be **confrontation**.

Israel would be the bearer of a promise, a **challenge** to change. The Jewish nation would be divided – would they believe in this Messiah and change, or not?

And it was going to be uncomfortable for everyone, not the **comfortable** ride into victory that they expected.

The nature of prophecy remains the same.

Wherever the Holy Spirit is active in prophecy, there are three things that happen:

There is **confrontation**, there is **challenge** and it is not **comfortable**.

What about prophecy for us, now?

What is it? How do we identify it, and understand it?

One definition of prophets which might be a starting point for us describes them like this:

They are “inspired deliverers of God’s message, not only about the future but to their own contemporaries, to whom they declare His will and whom they recall to His righteousness”.

Prophecy, including as it does **confrontation** between God’s kingdom and the kingdom of the world, **challenging** our choices and being **uncomfortable**, can be found either in or out of the church.

Some people have said that the prophets of today are those who predict what will happen economically if the West doesn’t change its financial practices; we must change or suffer the consequences; or those who say what will happen if climate change is not addressed urgently; or if poverty is not dealt with; or if morality is stubbornly absent from people’s lives, leading to riots and other criminal behaviour. You may be able to think of other examples of prophetic words being spoken in the world around us.

Within the church, the most frequent place we should hear prophecy is from the pulpit!

Preaching should **confront** people with God’s message; it should **challenge** their choices and ask them to decide whether or not they will change their behaviour or beliefs; and it should be **uncomfortable!**

(and I say that with some trepidation...)

But that’s not to say that prophecy is limited only to those who preach. All of us who are Christians can ask for the gift of prophecy from the Holy Spirit – as described in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, in his list of gifts of the Spirit.

The gift of prophecy can seem like a thorn in the side, sometimes. It will confront us with reality and bring us up short; it will challenge us to change our behaviour or beliefs; and it will be uncomfortable, at least at first.

Whoever said being a Christian was easy?

But it has always been a part of faith, the faith of those Jews who were looking out for the Messiah, the faith of Simeon as he saw Jesus, and the faith of the Early Church and beyond.

My family is a frequent visitor to the Greenbelt festival, which takes place during the August bank holiday weekend each year.

It’s a Christian arts and music festival, and one of its main strands is a programme of talks and discussions about the interaction between faith and the world.

And I think that a lot of what I have heard there over the years could be described as prophetic.

I remember one year hearing a speaker called Jim Wallis, an American Christian leader who speaks out about social justice and is a spiritual adviser to the President; or a lawyer called Clive Stafford-Smith who spoke about representing people held on death row in America and in Guantanamo Bay; or last August hearing an inspiring panel of people involved with bringing justice to the Middle East.

Prophecy is not just about predicting the future; it’s always been about bringing people back to God.

It’s about listening to God, and telling others – speaking out – about his character and his plans for them.

Plans that found their fulfilment in Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us 'according to the Scriptures'. Because Jesus did this, we can know God through his gift of the Holy Spirit and our lives can be changed. The same Spirit which gives the gift of prophecy.

If we don't receive the gift of prophecy, we nevertheless can be listening out for it spoken by others. We are not a lesser sort of Christian because of it, as Paul reminded the Corinthian church. We can still be on the lookout for that message of confrontation, of challenge and of discomfort, which brings us up short and reminds us of God.

We can be the movers and shakers, the people who get things done, the 'finishers' – acting on prophetic messages and helping to bring in the kingdom of God here and now.

Can you hear God's prophetic voice, challenging, warning, bringing about confrontation which demands choice and change?

Or can you hear someone else speaking those words, to which you can respond?

They could be spoken globally, nationally, within our community, or to us in our own lives.

If you can hear something prophetic, listen to that voice.

Tell others if appropriate, especially if it involves them.

Today, let's do more than just try to predict the weather.

Let's take a prophetic role in bringing in God's kingdom.

Amen.