

I don't know what Fr David, Fr Harold or Susan do when they wonder about their next sermon. This week I looked back through my old notes and discovered that I have preached more often on the second Sunday in Advent than on any other day in the calendar. So if you need a sermon on preparations, waiting, the search for peace in the run-up to Christmas or the real message among Santa's grotto, the tinsel and the White Christmas muzak, just let me know and I'll print one off for you. But I'm not going to talk about any of these today. I spent yesterday clearing up the garden and planting several hundred bulbs, so I'm feeling benevolent (and rather stiff). I'm going to pick up today's theme and talk about some of my favourite people: prophets. Of whom we have the complete spectrum: A-Z, Amos to Zechariah.

There is a very common misconception that prophets predict future events, like fortune-tellers or clairvoyants. It's true that some do talk about the future – that's what Malachi is doing in today's first reading, but even if they do it is not their main purpose. 'Thus says the Lord God: "See, I am sending my messenger."' Prophets are messengers, entrusted by God with particular information to deliver to specific people. Sometimes he tells them how and where to deliver it, and he doesn't make life easy for them. Often they were required to do much more than just speak, and frequently their efforts were met with outright hostility. They were threatened, vilified, ridiculed, or simply ignored. God had to reassure Jeremiah that he was not to blame if people failed to act on his words, but if he failed to deliver the message he would be punished.

The prophets spoke the word of God which they frequently received in dreams or visions which required interpretation. 'What do you see?' God asked Jeremiah more than once, and when he replied (an almond tree, a pot boiling over) God then explained what the vision represented and what message it conveyed. Ezekiel had extraordinary visions. The four living creatures, the swallowed book and the City of God all reappear in the Book of Revelation, and his was the vision of the valley of dry bones into which God breathed spirit and life. Virtually every prophet says: 'The word of the Lord came to me', and 'Thus says the Lord'. These were not the prophet's ideas, figments of his imagination, but have come directly from God. Prophets were people of the Word.

(I said 'his imagination', but there were female prophets. They are far less prominent in the scriptures, but Miriam (the sister of Aaron), Deborah (who was also a judge) and Isaiah's wife are all described as prophetesses, as are Huldah, who was instrumental in the discovery of the Book of the Law, and Noadiah, mentioned by Nehemiah during the reconstruction of Jerusalem after the exile. None of them has a 'book' attributed to them, but some of the sayings and songs of Miriam, Deborah and Huldah have survived in other writings. And then there was Anna, the eighty-four-year-old woman who had been fasting and praying constantly for decades since becoming a widow. Although we read about her in Luke's gospel, she was very much in the Old Testament tradition.

What all the prophets have in common is a message from God and an inescapable compulsion to deliver it. Their overall theme is the same, too: they point to the present-day life of the people of Israel or Judah, explain how they are falling short of what God expects of them, and set out the consequences if they do not mend their ways. They portray a God who condemns injustice and idolatry, they excoriate the rich, the religious elite and the rulers

who serve their own interests, and refer repeatedly to the covenant which God made with Abraham and confirmed with Moses: the Jews are God's special, chosen people and he will preserve and protect them if they will only obey his laws. The prophets who were active before the exile repeatedly warned of disaster if behaviour and belief did not change. When the Jews were first in Babylon the prophets made it clear that this was the consequence of their abandonment of their part in the covenant. But then the tone began to change. There were suggestions of a new beginning, a return to Jerusalem and rebuilding of the city, the temple, and of honour, worship and obedience to God. There is the promise of a Messiah: 'The messenger of the covenant – indeed he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts', as recounted by Malachi. 'But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?' The message is clear and unmistakable: there is hope, but rigorous preparation, amendment of life, will be necessary before God is again pleased with his people, as he was in years gone by.

And in this tradition there eventually emerges the very last of the 'Old Testament prophets', whom we actually meet at the beginning of the gospels. John the Baptist appears from the wilderness, where he too has heard the word of the Lord, proclaiming 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. It is John, finally, whose prophecy moves from the promise of a Messiah to the reality. 'Among you stands one whom you do not know'. His words are explicit and unambiguous; no analogies and no dreams that need interpretation. Repent of your sins and be baptised, because the Messiah is here now, among you. It is this that God's people have been promised, this for which they have waited for centuries, this which is happening now, just exactly where they are. And it is this message that we hear again in Advent, reminding us that God's promise has been fulfilled and that, as we worship and celebrate at Christmas, we and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.