

ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



Week Three: The Prophets

The journey of God's people, as with all our journeys, is rarely in a straight line. In times of national disaster and institutional corruption where do the people turn? God calls prophets "seers" who "*pro-femi*" "*speak in the name of someone*", in this case, of their disturbing God, "*I am who I am*". These prophets renew the imagination of the covenant with Moses and the original freed slaves. They re-state it in terms of their time, and they keep the vision clear.

The Bible records 16 books of the prophets but the whole people are called to be prophetic and to live out of a prophetic imagination. There are wonderful echoes of this much later in Mary's song - *The Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46-55) and in Jesus' first recorded sermon (Luke 4:16-22).

Main Text: Isaiah 55:1-13 - An invitation to renewed full life with God.

1. "Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come! Buy and eat; come, buy wine and milk without money, free! 2. Why spend money on what cannot nourish and your wages on what fails to satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. 3. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and you will live. I shall make an everlasting covenant with you in fulfilment of the favours promised to David. 4. Look, I have made him a witness to peoples, a leader and lawgiver to peoples. 5. Look, you will summon a nation unknown to you, a nation unknown to you will hurry to you for the sake of your God, because the Holy One of Israel has glorified you. 6. Seek out God while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near. 7. Let the wicked abandon his way and the evil one his thoughts. Let him turn back to God who will take pity on him, to our God, for he is rich in forgiveness; 8. for my thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways, declares the Lord. 9. For the heavens are as high above earth as my ways

are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts. 10. For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, 11. so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do. 12. Yes, you will go out with joy and be led away in safety. Mountains and hills will break into joyful cries before you and all the trees of the countryside clap their hands. 13. Cypress will grow instead of thorns, myrtle instead of nettles. And this will be fame for Yahweh, an eternal monument never to be effaced."
(Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

Later, at the time of the first Prophets Hosea and Amos, Hosea is living through the break-up of the Northern Kingdom (around 722 BCE), the people have compromised with surrounding religions and prostituted the Covenant with *"the God"*. Hosea is depressed and thinks the covenant is broken between God and the chosen people. In Hosea 6: 5 he imagines a furious God saying:

*"I have killed them with words from my mouth,
my judgement will blaze forth like the light,
for my pleasure is in faithful love, not sacrifice,
knowledge of God not burnt offerings."*

Hosea thinks that a just God can show no more mercy. But in chapter 11 God's mercy turns Hosea's own heart upside down and mercy triumphs over justice *"for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst and I will not come in wrath"* (Hosea 11:9). Here again is the revelation of God's undefinable reality. *"I am who I am"* breaks out of the boundaries that believers place upon God – that God must revenge God's honour. Still God remains wholly other, different, and it is this very quality of mercy, which now distinguishes *"the God"* from human images of God. Here in the inspired Scriptures, God's sovereignty is seen in forgiveness and pardoning. This is the profound basis of the reconciliation seen at the heart of Jesus' ministry and teaching. Ultimately, this is the reason for the existence of the Church – to continue to offer this divine quality of mercy and reconciliation within our world.

In God's mercy, God is revealed as completely other and yet so close. God is revealed in mercy but is also hidden and incomprehensible in the quality of that love and graciousness. In the Jewish Christian tradition, mercy holds together divine mystery and accessibility. Yet it doesn't allow for an easy chumminess!

So in the Hebrew Scriptures, God's mercy is coupled with graciousness and fidelity. But in the prophet Hosea it is also linked to God's holiness, indeed it reveals that very holiness. However, the link between mercy and holiness is not immediately obvious. The Hebrew word for holy normally implies something or someone set apart - different and superior to the worldly and the evil. This is echoed in Isaiah's vision of the *Seraphim* singing *"Holy, holy, holy!"* - which makes him feel unworthy and sinful. *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips."* (Isaiah 6:3-5). God's mercy is not to be trifled with - it is not the mercy of the fool, but of the All Holy.

Because of holiness, God cannot abide evil. This is what the Bible refers to as the wrath of God. It's not some extreme divine temper tantrum but the expression of God's holiness; we can't simply get rid of judgement. God's holiness and God's justice go together; but in the Hebrew Scriptures, this is a sign of hope - directed to the coming of the righteous Messiah (cf. Isaiah 11:4; Psalms 5-9.). Any evidence of justice in a self-evidently unjust world (cf. Moses and Jesus who are both seen as justice bearers and teachers) is already a manifestation of mercy for the oppressed, the marginalised, and those whose rights are denied.

God's mercy is not cheap grace. In the books of the Prophets Amos in 5:7, 24; 6:12; and in

Hosea 2:21; 12:2 we are clearly expected to do what is right. They see God holding back justified wrath to provide the space and opportunity for conversion. The divine mercy offers us an opportunity for transformation - a time of grace. So one dimension of God's mercy is grace for conversion. We see this in Jesus' open table fellowship - where people experience the kingdom before being challenged to enter it - or in his parables which offer opportunities for seeing differently through the frame of God's unexpectedly merciful kingdom.

After the time of the exile in Babylon, an experience of seeming judgement and abandonment, God says to the people through the prophet Isaiah:

"In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you... For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you." (Isaiah 54:7-8)

This is not the world of guilt, punishment and retribution. Nor does it contradict justice, but rather serves it. God in sovereign freedom establishes justice in God's way - and this way is fidelity which comes from the root Hebrew word meaning to stand or hold firm. Divine mercy is a dimension of divine fidelity. In God's absolute freedom, God is still reliable – and not capricious like the gods of Egypt or Canaan. The believer in all circumstances can depend on this.

This becomes clear at the beginning of Luke's Gospel when Mary walks across the hill country to help her expectant cousin Elizabeth. As they fall into each other's arms, the child dances in Elizabeth's womb, like David before the Ark of the Covenant coming to Jerusalem; and the two women sing forth the purest prophetic imagination of their people. They anticipate its renewal as God comes close again in sovereign freedom, starting not in the Temple, the Royal Court or the holy places, but from the little ones, the poor and oppressed. The vision is of a new unforeseen community of freedom, and it is our challenge to envision and celebrate this vision in our time. It is a community of freedom that is still evolving in new and unexpected ways; which we can anticipate in hope and in generously forgiving acts.

Again, and again in the prophets we hear the call to the people to live out of God's mercy (cf. Isaiah 54:7; 57: 16-19; 63:3 - 64:11). This promise is made to the poor and not the powerful. Isaiah 61:1 proclaims that the Messiah will be sent, above all, to the poor and the little ones, to bring them the good news. This will be the opening theme of Jesus' first public teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. However, this is not a human utopia - but the revelation of God's merciful saving will for all. Note in Mary's song, God raises up the poor and levels the proud-hearted to be alongside each other. No one is lost. Ultimately, this is God's promise. In every age, including our own, the believer and the Church are called to make this promise real in every way possible.

This mercy of God echoes above all throughout the poetry of the Psalms:-

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."
Psalm 103:8. There the sinner calls out again, and again: *"Be merciful to me O Lord"*. (4:1; 6:2 etc.).

We see it especially in Psalm 51:1 attributed to David after his adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, and after the Prophet Nathan has accused him in public. The repentant David cries: *"Have mercy on me, O God; according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgression."*

The prophets call us to face the real world with all its compromises and shabby blurrings of good and evil. They charge us to reverse our neglect of the weak, the frail; and, in our present time, of the threatened Creation itself. In helping us to see more clearly what needs

attention, and calling us to repent of our own collusion, they also reveal anew, the divine mercy. This mercy has never abandoned us and will sustain us every time we turn to God, in the midst of our struggles.

Reflection

Re-read the text from Isaiah and feel the call within it to a fuller intimacy with God. Hear God's word anew, and allow yourself to accept his divine mercy.

Isaiah was writing in a difficult time, but he reminds us that "*the God*" does not think like us. God can come to us unexpectedly and in all our struggles, whatever "*desert*" we are crossing at present. The invitation is to come with all "*who are thirsty*" to re-build the covenant community as a place for all, but especially for those most vulnerable and in need.

Where will God's mercy be leading you today?



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