

The prophetic church

Prophet Jim Smith reflects on what it means to be a prophetic church in the 21st century.

There is an accompanying mp3 on this subject. It would be useful to have this text available as the mp3 is playing.

Introduction

The prophets of the Bible brought the contemporary word of God to their times. They embodied certain principles which can be found in all of them, principles which were to be the foundation stones of the nation. In the New Covenant, these principles have been placed in the body of Christ. The risk has always been that we get this back to front. We see the individual prophets or prophetic voices as important, and the Church standing with and behind them. But God embodied the principle in the body, so the Church should be front and centre, living out the prophetic principles which the individuals enshrine and demonstrate.

We do this by being a prophetic presence, by living and behaving collectively in such a way that we show up not only the errors of our nations, but the better way in which the Lord would have the nations walk.

Our New Testament prophets are there to embody the prophetic principles which the church should adopt as it reaches out to the nation. What are the principles which make up the prophetic church?

1. We are called to be pure in an impure world

In the eyes of the prophets, holiness and purity are top of the list. **Isaiah** made this clear:-

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” (Isa 6:3)

Samuel made the issue very clear at Mizpah. He called for a return to purity, in a direct challenge to the morality of the day. *“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the*

Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hands of the Philistines.” (1 Sam 7:3) **Jesus** called for the same purity in Matt 5 -7, and in Mark 7. Again and again he pushes morality to the limit as he calls for clean hands and a pure heart. **Peter** called for holiness:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”
(1 Peter 2:9)

We are not called to be perfect. In fact such a burden of infallibility would be too great to bear, and frighten away those we were meant to serve. But we are meant to walk as best we can in the purity of life and soul, as a church, so that the nation can measure its own successes and failures against a biblical plumb line.

How might we go forward in this direction?

There isn't the space to answer this question in full, but here is one starting point:-

“Take off your shoes.” There is a need for cleansing and repentance.

The church at Ephesus is a good and a bad example. After seeing the power of the Spirit in and through Apostle Paul, *“ they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds., A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. (Acts 19:17-20)* They recognised that their scrolls were unclean, and they confessed and moved away from them, by destroying them. But when this same church is visited by the Lord in Revelation 3, they have fallen far from their initial cleansing and repentance:- *“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”* (Rev 2:4-5)

Cleansing and repentance will prove very costly, not only individually, but for many churches, who are far from pure. Many of our programmes are tainted, many of our financial attitudes worldly, many of our intentions are for success, achievement and looking big in the eyes of the world. Many who are leaders will have to resign, or at least confess and re-evaluate their lives and ministries, which have become so unholy as to be not just useless, but harmful.

“That’s O.K. but we won’t do it. We will still go to heaven when we die, and we will still belong to the Lord.”

That's true, and what is also true is that our Nations will lose any alternative pattern of lifestyle against which to measure themselves. Lost in the darkness, there will be no light from God's prophetic church to lead them back into the grace of God. Such a church which refuses to be cleansed so that it can offer cleansing, or at least the possibility of it to others, is not a very attractive proposition. Perhaps that's why so many of our churches are empty.

What areas of our current nations/world might we be challenging?

Do we have to look very hard to find the godlessness and impurity in our world? As of December 2009, in the U.K. we are finding Members of Parliament who have cheated the tax payers of large sums, and bankers who are taking large bonuses, even while the banking system totters on the brink of collapse because of their greed. We have yet to see that any of these institutions have learnt their lessons.

In the wider world, we are facing economic collapse, all flowing from greed and robbing the poor.

2. Called to be servants of one God in a godless age

In the days of Elijah, the people had lost their sense of godliness. Elijah directly challenges their position. *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him.”*
(1 Kings 18:21)

In his day, Jesus underlined the vital nature of understanding the unique spiritual position we are to occupy:- *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Apostle Paul drives it home:- *"At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Phil 2:10-11)

We are not called on to insult other Faiths or religions. But we are to follow the one true God, and reject any other. The Nation will then be able to see "who is God." (1 Kings 18:20) Then they must make their choice.

Our failure here is manifold.

* Our leaders have failed to encourage our uniqueness, in the light of some unbiblical view of tolerance.

* A listless laissez faire has crept into the church. We have become preoccupied with our own needs, and failed to see that the nation is under great threat from Faiths which do not acknowledge Jesus.

* The hugeness of our failure can be seen in any public place on a Sunday, when not only do the majority of our nation do their shopping or follow leisure pursuits - most of them don't care which faith is the real one, just as long as they are not troubled. Is this the result of our failure to live out our prophetic uniqueness?

Yet again, our failure has left the nation in doubt as to who is the true God. If we fail to live out our uniqueness, and demonstrate it, how can they choose?

3. Called to pure worship

Isaiah said it for all the prophets: *"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* (Isaiah 29:13) Hosea underlined it:- *"I desire mercy not sacrifice."* (Hosea 6:6) Jesus challenged the Pharisees when, to avoid the true nature of faith and worship they said, *"We are Abraham's descendents, and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be free?"* (John 8:33)

Our worship must be pure, from our hearts, not a ritualistic or formularistic passtime. The danger with faith is that it becomes religion - a system of beliefs, a bureaucracy, a locked in formula for appeasing God, or our own consciences, but fails to feed on “first love.” It makes no difference if we are using 1662 prayer book of the most free flowing New Wine or Soul Survivor ministry patterns. Worship must rise up from love, an offering - a sweet offering- of our very hearts and lives.

This gives it reality, and helps all who look on it to see the reality of the living Lord to whom it is directed. Without it, and its inherent challenge to give, to grow, to change, to surrender, and to be free, the nation has no light.

4. Called to sacrificial living Acts 2:42

We have become a materialistic society. Wanting, having and owning at any price have brought us low. Greed has destroyed us. God's people must offer the radical alternative to greed- sacrificial living. John the Baptist spelt it out: *“The man who has two tunics should share with he who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” (Luke 3:11) Jesus commended it: “As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the Temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.” I tell you the truth” he said, “this poor widow has put in much more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.” (Luke 21: 1-4)*

Acts 2 is a good summary and target.

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:44-47)

Sharing, giving and accepting were the marks of our first community. They still remain valid principles. We are to give without thought of the cost, or of getting any return. We are to give and keep giving, even when we are in difficulty and under pressure. Greed is to be swept away in a passion for sacrifice. This will “prove” God. (Malachi 3:10) It will show that we do not

need as much as we think we need; that we have a heavenly Father who knows our need, and that it is possible to live without being driven by greed, acquisition and debt.

Sadly, my experience of the western church over 40 years of ministry is quite the opposite. We have become as greedy, as self serving and as grasping as the nation we were meant to serve. Giving has been replaced by “saving for the rainy day”, budgets and putting our own needs first. If we want to see where we are, we only need to take a look at ourselves in the mirror of our European culture.

5. Called to watch and pray

Ezekiel was called to be a watchman over the Nation. *“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.”* (Ezek.33:7) Jesus transferred that challenge to his disciples:- *“Stay here and keep watch.”* (Mark 14:34) Apostle Paul developed it into an ambassadorial watchman role between God and man. *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”* (2 Cor 5:18)

God's people are to be the prophet in the watchtower, watching out for our land, calling out to God for it, and warning our citizens when danger is approaching. If we had been doing this, we would not have been in the current situation. Is there now any chance of reclaiming this position? Will anyone listen now?

As I have said and written many times, prayer is at a low ebb in our church. It has been supplanted by action. Programmes and activities have become the way of the church. Many will attend seminars on all sort of worldly options, but few will give their time to prayer - to selfless and dedicated waiting on God, to searching of the Bible and the spiritual realm, so as to discern the call and purposes of God. Are we seeing the fruits of this prayerlessness in the spiritual weakness of our nation, in the advance of secularism and other Faiths, and in the laziness and unyieldingness of God's people? I obviously think so. This prayerlessness will be God's accusation against us. We want to blame the nation for its short comings. I fear the Lord will point the finger at our failure to watch, to pray and to obey.

6. Called to challenge the Satanic alternative

Goliath offered the satanic alternative to being God's prophetic people. His alternative - power, domination and surrender to the self centered passions, to conquer, destroy and rule.

Using aggressive power, he sought to control, and to take control of God's people. (1 Sam. 17) David had to expose the false nature of the satanic alternative:- *“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”* (1 Sam 17:26) The satanic alternatives which our nation has accepted is a defilement, as well as a defying of the love and power of God. But these things can be broken, and in the process, the new alternative revealed:- *“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.”* (v45) *“All those gathered here will know that It is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lords, and he will give all of you into our hands.”* (v47)

Apostle Paul made the same point - that the satanic alternative had been broken, and a new way of living in the promises of God was available:- *“He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with all its regulations that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”* (Col 2: 13-15)

Our function is to challenge the satanic alternative, and to offer a biblical alternative, - moving in the power of God. The problem is that so many of God's people don't want to do this. I'm not saying that many are living the satanic model, although sadly some are. But the many just don't want to make the effort to challenge the satanic ways.

- * We want have and control our money.
- * We want to live in a nice cosy fellowship. This doesn't challenge anything – it surrenders the ground to the enemy.
- * We don't want to live a different lifestyle - at home, in our marriage, as parents in our leisure activities, our places of work. We don't want to live to the different standards which would break the cycle of violence and despair which is gripping so many, the financial bondage which is invading so

many, the hopelessness and hardness which is entering into our nation.

There is another way – our ancestors showed us in Acts 2:42. But we have settled down, sunk into the sand, put up our tent, shut the flaps, settled for what we have got. The very radicalness of our Faith, which challenged the might of Rome itself, has become a whimper. Meanwhile the nation sinks into atheism and despair, into a darkness which the light of Christ was meant to obliterate.

7. Called to the Promises

This is where we set the alternative agenda.

As Israel set out into the wilderness, for what was going to be forty tough years, they were sustained by the promises of God – *“to bring them up out of that land (Egypt) into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”* (Ex 3:8) Somehow, through all the ups and downs, they lived by these promises, and this not only gave them courage and direction, but marked them out from the nations they were passing through.

With the coming of Jesus, those same promises were passed to the Christian church.

“All authority in heaven and on the earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations – and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” (Matt.28:20)

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”
(1 Peter 2:10)

As we live the promises, so we display God's power to change situations which seem unchangeable. We offer the radical alternative to greed and despair. What might that look like?

- * Saying “no” to greed and “yes” to sharing.
- * Saying “no” to rights and privileges and “yes” to sacrifice and service.
- * Saying “no” to a secular driven agenda and “yes” to God's purposes for our nation.
- * Saying “no” to “me “ and “yes” to ”us.”
- * Standing firm against every invasion of secular and self driven agendas into our nation.
- * Holding our leaders to high standards of honesty and integrity Being compassionate to them when they fall, but rejecting their humanistic ways.

We are to embody all of this in ourselves - we are the body of Christ. Then we are to reflect it to the world, in a prophetic statement – *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*(John 1:14)

Is all this just a dream? Yes and no. Yes it is, and I find it very hard to believe that the church I serve can ever be a prophet to this or any nation. But on the other hand, the nation has drunk deeply at the well of greed, humanism and atheism, and that has proved to be poisoned water. Perhaps the time is coming when we can become more what God intended, and the Nation more ready to look at us and listen to us. Let's hope so. Time is running out.

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