

*"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."*

When Peter spoke these words, quoting from the prophet Joel, he did so confident that with the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples, this prophecy had been fulfilled. At Pentecost, the spirit was poured out on all flesh and it was a spirit of prophecy. From our later perspective, Pentecost is often described as the foundation of the church, the time when God's Holy Spirit came to guide and inspire us, establishing the foundation for our continuing worship and service. But if the spirit at Pentecost was a spirit of prophecy and Pentecost is the foundation of the church, then surely we are called somehow, in some way, to be a prophetic church? And that's what I would like to think about today. What is a prophetic Church? What might it mean for us to be a prophetic Church?

Prophecy, as we find it in the Bible, seems to come in two broad categories. One kind of prophecy is about telling the future, the other is about telling the present. So in the pages of Scripture we find prophecies of the future restoration of Israel, prophecies of a coming Messiah, and prophecies of the last days. And then there are prophecies like Amos' condemnation of the corruption of his day or Ezekiel's challenges to Israel's incredibly complacent certainty that they will not be punished for their sins. What both these broad types of prophecy have in common, whether they tell the future or tell the present, is that they reveal a truth that could not otherwise be seen and they are inspired by God. So Amos' was not just an individual who felt it was wrong that widows and orphans were left to starve, he was sent by God to tell the people that God himself condemned them for leaving orphans and widows to starve.

The prophecy in Joel, which I started with and which Peter tells us has come true at Pentecost, is that there will be a time when God's Holy Spirit will be poured out in such a way that it will not just be isolated individuals like Isaiah or Miriam or Jeremiah who are given this divine insight and command to speak, but that this will be given to all, to everyone. To old and young, men and women, slave and free. All will have the gift of the Spirit.

The flip-side of this broad gift of insight, however, is the other side of prophecy - the compulsion to speak, whatever the consequences. Throughout the Old Testament prophetic writings, there is a clear sense that a prophet cannot choose whether or not to pass on the insight that has been given to them, as Amos said "The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?" And the words of the prophets were not often welcome, since so often they pointed out the ways in which people had strayed from God's presence.

So prophecy can be an insight which tells how the future will be, or how the present is. It is an insight that is given to us by God. Not one which is formed from our own concerns! And it brings with it a responsibility to share it.

Now, if all this is a correct exposition of prophecy, what does it mean to be a prophetic Church? You will probably know the hymn, often sung at Pentecost, *Breathe on me breath of God*. In Ancient Hebrew the words for breath and spirit are the same and if you think of the words inspiration and respiration, you will realise that they are very similar in English too. If we are to be a prophetic Church, then we must pray that we will be in-breathed, in-spired with God's breath, so that 'we may love what God dost love, and do what God would do'. It is only when we are close to God and when we know that we are dependent on him for inspiration and insight that we can have the humility to be conformed to his will, so that we can become channels of his grace.

If we draw close to God and conform ourselves to him then, we pray, he will lead us into prophecy. And this may be something that is given to individuals or to communities. The prophets that most often come to mind are the prominent individuals of the Old Testament, but at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on all the believers together, and it was the experience of hearing so many of them speaking in different languages, all at the same time, that touched those who were witnesses at that time.

And there will be, and are, people of faith who in our time are inspired to speak out or to live a life that carries a prophetic message. We might perhaps have seen Mother Teresa as one such person, but there will be many more who are part of prophetic communities - communities that are entrusted with God's words - and that live a corporate life that conveys a challenging message from God. Becoming such a community is, I think, part of what we should be about as a Church. It's not an easy thing to do, insofar as our lives are or might be governed by different values to the lives of those around us. We will always risk attracting criticism, but if the prophetic voice of our community is inspired by God and conforms to his will, the way of life we offer by example will be life-giving in a way that goes beyond the results of our own efforts. And at the basis of this is the gift of the Holy Spirit to inspire us to follow Christ's command to love: to love God and love our neighbour. For if we love we cannot but be prophetic in either sense.

Let us therefore be inspired by God to show his love in the world, living as a prophetic community so that through us, God's Holy Spirit may reach others, and that we may not be afraid to tell it as it is or how it could be. Amen.