Catholic Union

Ampleforth Summer Gathering

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**The Importance of the Prophetic Voice**

Perhaps I should begin by recalling that in the Rite of Baptism, the dignity of the baptised person is described as prophet, priest and king. There is no doubt that much discussion has focussed on the second and third of these: yes, all the baptised, whether ordained or not, share in the priestly ministry of the Church, in particular by offering their own prayers and service to God. And Jesus Christ shares with us the royal dignity which is properly his: it is this that enables us to pray “**Our** Father”. St Paul highlights when he calls us co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17), as does St James in his letter (2:5) where he describes we who were poor as “heirs to the kingdom”.

But I wonder if we are so sure about our prophetic role? Let me explain what I mean. The role of the prophet is to be so in tune with God that he or she speaks what is true even when this is painful or inconvenient. So prophecy is not about foretelling the future, but much more about understanding the present accurately. Truth is paramount. Yes, the speaking has to be done with charity, and opportune ways have to be found, but ultimately is the truth that matters.

Buried within this definition is a two-fold implication. First of all, the prophet (and I include all the baptised, ordained and non-ordained) have a responsibility to grow in knowledge and understanding, through prayer and reading, meditation and reflection so that they come to a deep understanding of the truth. And secondly the prophet must have the courage, and the support of others, to speak out that message. This is, of course, to be done in humility and love, not with pride; with discretion not with anger.

In the Old Testament, the role of the prophet was to condemn wickedness and idolatry. Sometimes this is expressed in strong language, deliberately chosen to shock and therefore to provoke repentance and change.

The reading from Jeremiah chapter 11 given for reading at Mass today is an excellent example: “1 The word that came to [Jeremiah](http://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=30) from the Lord, saying, 2 'Stand at the gate of the [Temple](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11357) of [the Lord](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6291) and there proclaim this message. Say, "Listen to the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who come in by these gates to worship the Lord. 3 The Lord Sabaoth, the [God](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5217) of Israel, says this: Amend your behaviour and your actions and I [will](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=12332) let you stay in this place. 4 Do not put your [faith](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=4554) in delusive words, such as: This is the Lord's sanctuary, the Lord's sanctuary, The Lord's sanctuary! 5 But if you really amend your behaviour and your actions, if you really treat one another fairly, 6 if you do not exploit the stranger, the orphan and the widow, if you do not shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not follow other gods, to your own ruin, 7 then I shall let you stay in this place, in the country I gave for ever to your ancestors of old. 8 Look, you are putting your [faith](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=4554) in delusive, worthless words! 9 Steal, would you, murder, commit adultery, perjure yourselves, burn [incense](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6079) to Baal, follow other gods of whom you know nothing? - 10 and then come and stand before me in this [Temple](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11357) that bears my name, saying: Now we are safe to go on doing all these loathsome things!

11 Do you look on this [Temple](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11357) that bears my name as a den of bandits? I, at any rate, can see straight, [the Lord](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6291) declares. 12 "Now go to the place which used to be mine at Shiloh, where I once gave my name a home; see what I have done to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel! 13 And now, since you have done all these things, [the Lord](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6291) declares, and refused to listen when I spoke so urgently, so persistently, or to answer when I called you, 14 I shall treat this [Temple](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11357) that bears my name, and in which you put your heart, the place that I gave you and your ancestors, just as I treated Shiloh, 15 and I shall drive you out of my sight, as I did all your kinsfolk, the whole race of Ephraim." (Jeremiah 7:1-15).

Or to take a further example, Isaiah in chapter 1 addresses the leaders of Israel as “rulers of Sodom ... people of Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:10). He then goes on to shock the priestly caste: “I am sick of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of calves. I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come and present yourselves before me, who asked you to trample through my courts?” (Isaiah 1:11-12).

Perhaps the most famous story is that of King David and the role of the prophet Nathan in getting him to understand the way he had sinned by seducing Bathsheba and having Uriah killed (2 Samuel 11-12). Though we are used to reading the fiery words of prophets, and may think that this is the only way for prophets to speak, in this case Nathan achieves the repentance of David by calmly telling him a parable. Nevertheless Nathan is a brave man; and David too shows his greatness by being prepared to admit his sin.

When we read the first book of the Kings, we find time and time again the wickedness of the rich and the powerful cliques being denounced of by a series of prophets, all of whom left no separate written record. The greatest of them is of course Elijah. In chapter 18 we hear the story of the denunciation of the idolatry of Ahab and his foreign pagan wife, Jezebel, leading on to the trial of strength between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, culminating in the massacre of those prophets. Elijah again denounces Ahab and Jezebel over the scandalous affair of the murder of Naboth, who was unwilling to give up his vineyard to suit the king and queen. And yet, Ahab repents and so is spared the punishment that he deserved.

Further on in the first book of the Kings (1 Kings 22) we read of Micaiah . King Ahab of Israel makes an alliance with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to attack the Syrians with a view to the capture of Ramoth-gilead, a piece of disputed territory. Jehoshaphat insists that Ahab discover God’s will by asking the prophets. The corps of prophets tell him to go ahead and that he will be successful in his campaign. Jehoshaphat is possibly not convinced and asks if there are any other prophets to ask. Ahab mentions Micaiah the son of Imlah, but goes on to say that all his past prophecies have been against him (1 Kings 22:7-8). They send a messenger to bring Micaiah, and the messenger tells Micaiah to give a favourable prophecy to Ahab this time (1 Kings 22:12-13).

Micaiah replies indignantly to the messenger that he will speak whatever the Lord says to him (1 Kings 22:14), and then tells the kings to go ahead and wage the war. Ahab then questions Micaiah again, insisting that he speak nothing but the truth. Finally Micaiah gives the true prophecy, to the effect that the war will end in defeat and indeed in the grizzly death of Ahab (1 Kings 22:19-22). Nevertheless Ahab ordered Micaiah to be held in prison until he returned from battle, unharmed (1 Kings 22:27).

Perhaps concerned about the prophecy, Ahab disguised himself in battle rather than lead his troops openly as their king. However, Ahab was killed by a randomly shot arrow. Micaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. The other 400 were shown to be false prophets, because they had all predicted victory for Ahab and Jehoshaphat.

So, from these few examples we should note that prophecy takes courage. And to listen to prophecy also takes courage and wisdom. To Ahab’s credit, we should notice that he did insist that Micaiah tell the truth.

Prophecy too is characteristic of Jesus’ preaching: “20 Then he began to reproach the towns in which most of his miracles had been worked, because they refused to repent. 21 'Alas for you, Chorazin! Alas for you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles done in you had been done in [Tyre](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11768) and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 Still, I tell you that it [will](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=12332) be more bearable for [Tyre](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11768) and [Sidon](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=10803) on Judgement Day than for you. 23 And as for you, Capernaum, did you want to be raised as high as heaven? You shall be flung down to hell. For if the miracles done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have been standing yet. 24 Still, I tell you that it [will](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=12332) be more bearable for Sodom on Judgement Day than for you.' “ (Matthew 11:21-24). And we know from archaeological evidence that the people of Chorazin were very lax about their religious observances. The ruins of the synagogue are adorned with figures and relief sculptures, though graven images were strictly forbidden to the Jews.

Prophets were normative in the early church. “10 The one who went down is [none](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=8523) other than the one who went up above all the heavens to fill all things.  11 And to some, his 'gift' was that they should be apostles; to some prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; 12 to knit God's holy people together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ, 13 until we all reach [unity](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11813) in [faith](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=4554) and [knowledge](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6682) of the Son of [God](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5217) and [form](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=4781) the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of [Christ](http://www.catholic.org/clife/jesus) himself. “ (Ephesians 4:10-13).

The debate about whether pagan converts to Christianity had to observe the Jewish law was impassioned. Paul, Peter and James had different understandings (see Acts 11 and 15). But Paul took the prophetic line, and ultimately it was his view that won the day. It was he who saw the truth accurately though he was the most junior of the apostles.

Up till now we have seen prophecy as a lone voice speaking up against power, whether royal power, or the priestly temple cult. So the prophet may be called upon by God to denounce civil power or slack religious practice. There is, further, a corporate aspect to prophecy as well. Sometimes it is the duty of the prophetic body (which may be composed of many people) to speak out together against abuses or sinful situations.

How does this analysis figure in our modern day? We should note first of all that what classically is called prophecy is now often described as whistle-blowing. This is particularly the case in large organisations, like a multi-national corporation, the NHS, the armed forces and so on, where bad and often illegal practices are condoned and covered up by the powerful. When an individual tries to point out the errors the reaction is often one of deafness and a closing of ranks. The whistleblowers sometimes lose their jobs, or perhaps simply sidelined. It takes courage and humility on the part of the organisation to accept criticism and to be prepared to change (in religious terms to be converted). But whistleblowing is essentially a prophetic action, and the whistleblower themselves require the same qualities of love and trust in God as the religious prophet.

How does prophecy or whistle-blowing differ from simple criticism? It seems to me that they key component is love: love for the sinner, whether a human individual or the sinful institution. And it has a desire (at least implicit) to be doing the right thing, a wish to do God’s will and to glorify God. “’Truly,’ men shall say, ’the just are rewarded. Truly there is a God who does justice on earth” (Psalm 57:12).

One might object: what about Jonah? The reluctant prophet, the prophet who refuses to speak, who seems to hate the people to whom he is sent, and who indeed runs away from his responsibilities? The message of the book is that though Jonah wasn’t bothered about the Ninevites, God was bothered and God forces Jonah, against his will to go and preach. The Ninevites respond to the preaching though it is so inadequate, and God spares them from destruction.

The prophetic tradition never died in the Christian tradition. There are many examples of great saints who by their words and actions stood out against the evils and compromises of their own day. In my own tradition, St Benedict tells that Abbot in chapter 3 of the Rule “1As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; 2and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. 3The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.”

The campaign to end slavery in the British Empire, led by William Wilberforce and his associates, had the characteristics of prophecy. The more modern campaigns for the relief of third-world debt and for fair-trade have a similar religious origin and show many of the same characteristics. The campaign against global warming comes typically from an environmental rather than a religious concern. And the present campaign against female genital mutilation issues from a feminist rather than a religious perspective. Both campaigns, though, share many of the typical features of classical prophecy. The Church too, in its insistence on the value of life, from conception to natural death, is of course making a prophetic stand.

This is not to reduce the value of the Church to that of a pressure group. Nevertheless, one can see common characteristics in all these campaigns. At its most basic level, the People of God remind themselves that they were oppressed and enslaved in Egypt (and at other times in their history) and that the God in whom we believe is a God who liberates. He is a God of freedom, of love and of life. Unlike the pagan gods, our God is not a capricious god to be placated, but a loving God who cares for the orphan and the widow, the most powerless in society. Therefore those on the side of God must be on the side of the poor and the powerless.

The prophet is one who sees the truth and tells the truth. He or she enables others (the more simple, the more sinful, the more conflicted) themselves to see the truth. And they do this sometimes by denunciation, sometimes by the use of parables (as Nathan did to David), and sometimes by symbolic action (think of the prophet Hosea, told to marry an unfaithful woman).

But we in the Church become much more uncomfortable when the prophetic voices are directed at the Church itself, whether these voices are coming from within or from outside the ranks of the Church. We have heard so many accusations that the Church had a culture of covering-up child abuse, and we recognise that there is truth in these accusations. Yes, the ways the Church behaved in the past were not good. We resolve not to repeat those mistakes.

Now there are further complaints about the running of mother and baby homes, particularly in Ireland, both north and south of the border. And here too there seems to be genuine ground for complaint. The behaviour in previous years certainly fell short of the best practice of our own day.

What seems to have happened is that the roles have been reversed. In the past the Church saw itself as the prophet with authority to criticise the secular power. Now it is the secular power which has taken on the role of prophet to criticise and correct the church.

How should we react to this? There is a danger that we shrug wearily, retreat into our shell, and be defensive. Yes, of course the prevailing culture and attitude to unmarried mothers is different now to what it was half a century ago. And yes, the economic situation is now much more healthy than it was in the past. But these are excuses. It seems to me that the church has to be prepared to accept criticism, to hear the voice of the secular prophet and repent. It is only if it does this that it will have the authority to denounce the evils of our own day.

Then, cleansed of its own sins, it will be able to speak out against the cheapening of life, the economic exploitation of the poor, the despoliation of the planet, and the myriad other crimes against love and compassion that those with eyes to see and ears to hear cannot fail to notice.

The presence of the prophetic in the secular world is a sign of a healthy society. There has always been corruption and sin in the world, and I guess there always will be. That should not shock us. But if we fail to recognise the corruption, or feel that nothing can be done and therefore we simply have to live with it, that that truly is shocking.

I began by asking whether we have neglected our prophetic role as baptised Christians. I conclude by seeing criticism as a sign of health and by hoping that the recent scandals may have the effect of galvanising the Church into reforming itself and recovering its prophetic voice. Perhaps God’s spirit is working in this situation after all.

Fr Terence Richardson OSB