

John Docherty, October 18, 2015
“His life an offering”

Prophets are a difficult bunch.

They speak truth.

They speak truth to those who should know better; to those in power.

They sometimes speak in veiled language; in imagery, or in metaphors.

They sometimes adopt a poetic form and diplomatic tact, and they sometimes adopt a brutal directness.

But they always speak truth.

They sometimes speak of things not yet come to pass – but if these things ultimately do not come to pass, they are no prophets.

And even if they speak of things not yet come to pass, they are always speaking truth to their contemporaries, and there is something in their declarations that will have meaning in their own ‘here and now’.

The Hebrews had lots of prophets, starting with Abraham, through to Malachi. According to the website “The Jewish virtual library”, “The Talmud ... says that there had been twice as many prophets as the number of people who left Egypt (2,600,000), but only those whose messages were for future generations were recorded.”

That’s a lot of prophets. A lot of people speaking truth to the powers that be, or to the people as a whole.

Of those who had “messages for future generations” that were worth putting down in writing, Judaism (or at least some of Judaism – there doesn’t seem to be absolute agreement on the list) numbers 46 male prophets and 7 female prophets.

That’s somewhat less than the 5 million or so who had something to say at one point or another, but it’s still a fair list for a smallish nation.

The 7 female prophets are Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah (mother of Samuel), Abigail (one of King David’s wives), Huldah (who lived in Jerusalem and was the wife of the son of the king’s keeper of the wardrobe), and Esther.

You probably recognize at least some of the names, maybe Sarah, Deborah and Esther.

The 46 male prophets, as I said, start with Abraham, whom you may not think of as a prophet, and include the usual suspects along with some you’ve probably never heard of.

Our Bible has 15 or 16 books attributed to various male prophets, and one that at least tells the story of Esther.

All of these books of prophecy, then, are assumed to have something to say, not only to the people of their time, but to future generations.

Of the male prophets, there are three who are considered major prophets, largely, but not exclusively, because of the volume of writing attributable to them. Those are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The others are grouped as the minor prophets – they have something to say, but come nowhere near the level of importance of the major prophets.

And of the major prophets, one stands head and shoulders above the rest.

Isaiah.

If you can quote any passages of prophecy from the Old Testament, I'd be willing to bet they are most likely to come from Isaiah – with the possible exception of a quote from Micah :

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

(If there are other prophetic passages that come to mind, please feel free to quote them during our sharing time ...)

Most other common passages are likely to come from Isaiah.

The passage we read this morning about the suffering servant; bearing our infirmities; being led to the slaughter like a lamb; being numbered among the transgressors yet bearing the sin of many; is probably as familiar to you as any passage from the New Testament.

And that's not surprising in some ways. Isaiah is either quoted directly or alluded to in the New Testament more than all of the other prophets combined. He stands, as I said, head and shoulders above the rest.

For we Anabaptist Mennonites, I suppose he has a special place because of all the prophets who call on the rulers of the day to act rightly, Isaiah has a particular focus on questions of justice and proper care for the vulnerable.

Isaiah chapter 58 is a perfect example, and a passage that you've probably heard recited ad nauseum :

“...³ ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

I suppose Isaiah is also particularly cherished by Christians, because he is the prophet read by Jesus when he announces the beginning of his ministry:

Luke 4.16-26

“16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

The passage we read from the Book of the Acts of the apostles has Philip meeting up with an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading what? – Isaiah, of course.

Isaiah.

The proposed lectionary theme for this morning, the inspiration for which was taken, I’m sure, from the passage we read from Isaiah chapter 53, is “His life an offering”.

The expected thrust for the meditation, I suppose, would be take this prophetic passage from Isaiah as a springboard to look at Jesus’ life given as an offering for the salvation of the world, with perhaps a segue of some kind to point out that we, too, are to give our lives as an offering to God in service to others.

But I started this meditation by stating that prophets are a difficult bunch.

They speak the truth.

And even if they speak of things not yet come to pass, they are always speaking truth to their contemporaries, and there is something in their declarations that will have meaning in their own ‘here and now’.

The traditional Jewish interpretation of this passage in Isaiah is that the servant being spoken of is the nation of Israel itself. Isaiah is telling them that they will be struck down and afflicted, but that, ultimately, if they trust in God, they will be rescued. There are definite messianic overtones, and the ultimate salvation may be delayed, but rescue *will* come :

“... with long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation ...”

The Believer’s Church Bible Commentary on Isaiah, has a slightly different reading of what this passage might mean in the ‘here and now’ of Isaiah’s contemporaries. Ivan Friesen writes :

“The beginning and end of the fourth servant song indicate that through the servant’s witness the nations will see the power of nonviolence, which undergirds God’s reign and is the condition for peace on earth ... The description of the servant’s suffering and death occupies the center of the song. This suffering and death illustrate the power of one person, solidly obedient to God’s will, inspiring future generations to faithfulness ...”

Typical Mennonite, eh? Nonviolence, peace on earth, the power of one ...

I can’t help but take note of the fact that tomorrow is election day in Canada – a time for one person, solidly obedient to God’s will, to step into a voting booth and speak truth to power. It’s a time for each of us wannabe prophets to make our mark, and have *our* say in the kind of country, the kind of society, we want.

I don’t think that there is a right, or a wrong, way to vote – that depends on what you think is best for all of us.

I know how *I* will vote, but I don’t assume I have a monopoly on good sense, a corner on justice, or a fully informed picture of what the future will bring, regardless of who is voted in.

And I don’t assume you have any of the above either.

What I *do* assume, or at least hope, is that you care enough about the lives of those around you to participate in this exercise of government, regardless of which party you feel best represents your sense of what is best for all of us.

And I also assume that what is best for all of us includes what is best for the most vulnerable among us.

Voting certainly isn't the only way we should be speaking truth to those in power, but it's the cornerstone of all that will follow in the next few years.