

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

How Do You Treat A Prophet?

I suppose the first question is, how do you *tell* a prophet? The answer isn't simple; "false prophet" is a frequent phrase in the Bible, and there are many people who fancy themselves in the rôle of prophet, who are actually faking it. One of the best ways to be disobedient and self-indulgent is to claim you've had a revelation telling you to do so. One hears the ring of sublime insincerity from time to time in various religious voices. But Jesus warned us that false prophets, even false messiahs, would be very convincing, and that many people would be taken in.

What Do Real Prophets Say?

One of the qualities in the Biblical prophets is that *they seldom say what people want to hear*. If democratic market-research could lead us to prophetic truth, we'd never have had an Amos or a Jeremiah. Instead, their message is characteristically unwelcome, out of key with their times, and provocative of dislike, hatred, and violence. We do not find them simply dividing society, as a politician might, forming a comfortable party and swaying public opinion. Instead, the prophets isolate themselves from *everybody*, and suffer rejection and loneliness which makes them a living sign of the whole people's distance from their God. If such men are self-seeking they give no sign of it. Jeremiah especially points to the horror of his career; why, he asks bitterly, should I be the one to bring unwelcome messages, and so regularly be shot for it? Compare this fate with the life of the telly-evangelist, spinning the popular line to an adoring audience of subscribers, and you will spot the difference instantly. When people praise one another for prophecy, it is quite likely that self-indulgence is at work.

How About Humility?

Talking for God may be accompanied by massive demands for trust and submission on the part of the listeners. But prophets ask nothing for themselves and (as it goes) are seldom offered anything for themselves. It isn't a matter of pride to them that they speak for God; it's a terrifying duty which they

would rather not do. It seems to me that the co-existence of authority with humility is an irreplaceable prophetic quality. An arrogant prophet would stand self-condemned; God's message does not need human defenders, and his true messengers are content to declare the truth and let it have its way.

"Whether They Listen Or Not"

When God's truth has been spoken aloud in the world, it changes history. It doesn't require any human movement to effect this change. *The Word of God is alive and active; it doesn't go forth without accomplishing what it was meant to do*. We see one instance of this in the creation itself; *God spoke, and it came into being*. If anyone wants a different sort of cosmos, hard cheese: the world is as it is. Of course, people insist on living in contradiction, in the teeth of reality. But that doesn't mean they have changed evil into good or falsehood into truth. We all know moments where we have been told the truth, and have insisted on ignoring it. But the truth will always be victorious in the end. How much blood we are prepared to shed before we acknowledge it, I'm not sure. A prophet will tell us the truth in and out of season. We close our ears at our own peril.

O For A Quiet Life!

I feel very sorry for Jesus in today's Gospel. I also wonder what his family thought, when he stood up in the local synagogue only to be greeted with contempt. There is little trace in Mark of the *Holy Family*, supporting and welcoming the Messiah. In this Gospel Jesus has an *uncomprehending* family, stupid disciples, and fragile friendships. In this we find his life completely like that of the prophets. Hosea's disastrous marriage, Amos' contentious career, Ezekiel's horror at the fate suffered by his beloved land, Isaiah's feeling of revulsion from the kings he had to serve prepare us for the Man of Sorrows Jesus becomes. If we want to redress this wrong, and to be on the side of the angels, we must start listening to the things Jesus told us, and build our house on them.

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