

DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM DIACONATE PREPARATION

SCRIPTURE COURSE

Approaching The Prophets

The study of the Scripture, as we have quickly appreciated, is more complex than we thought. The poetry is poetry, but not quite as we know it. The thinking is philosophical, but then takes sudden religious dives and swerves we aren't expecting. There is real historical writing, but seldom obedient to our historical principles. Perhaps nowhere are we on such foreign ground in the Bible than in the field of prophecy. Everything about prophecy cuts across the preconceptions, habits of mind, and intellectual structure of the world we inhabit. I even believe you could present a wide-ranging analysis of our world from this point of view which would yield seriously important results for our strategy as a religious movement.

The power of our faith rests, as it always has, on believers' live experience of God which impels communication and proclamation, and the gathering of a people addressed by the one God. This is the heart of the faith, and the heart of the prophetic experience itself. The denial of such a possibility is the denial of the reality and relevance of God to the world we live in. Our culture *does* deny that God addresses us, and therefore rejects any notion that such an address might gather us as a people. (This is nowhere truer than in the UK, a country that can be governed by a Christian who "doesn't do God".)

The one feature of the phenomenon that seems to present us with a cultural foothold is the individualism – we could say in many cases, the *loneliness* of the prophet. The trend of our culture has been towards the individual and the validity of individual inspiration and response *alone*.¹ The consequent fragmentation of what is communally-held and the dismissal of tradition as a source for individual guidance has monumentally weakened the possibility of religious communion on the horizontal human scale. Once again, however, the danger of easy assumption raises its head. The Biblical prophets, for all their conspicuous isolation and towering personal character, are the absolute opposite of the post-modern *individual*. They are blazingly obedient, hugely traditional, and lit from within by their relationship to God, a relationship they firmly ascribe to God's initiative not their own, and which they are ready to find a tremendous incubus rather than a precious privilege. Again and again we find these men complaining bitterly of the burden of their rôle and the singularity into which it has impelled their lives. They are crushed, not fulfilled, by their ministry; they are only too well aware

¹ This is a specious enough value in itself; for the most part we only value this individual insight as a positive-sounding mode of rejecting community-based values. We follow this up by declaring the personal values allegedly set by each individual *private property* – of no interest to anyone else. So we end up valuing no ideals whatsoever on any basis wider than the personal internal forum. This may seem to be left intact as an ideal space for religion; unless, as we believe, God has plans for us, not as piecemeal individuals, but precisely in our community-building dimension. That is why Christianity in our culture is comprehensively under the cosh.

that the prophetic task has lifted them away from their own desires and motives, and incorporated them into the plans of a God whose implacable ways are beyond controlling. Still, above all else, they long for their vision to be shared by others: they are heralds of a truth which outbids all individuality. This is true of the whole of Biblical revelation; it has been said that the only individualism in the Gospel is that of the Lost Sheep.

These days we are dismissively superior to our past, always ready to psychoanalyse it and to explain it away. In such a wasteful mood we may feel that we know a figure like Moses as well as we know, say, the emperor Constantine. We conjecture that Constantine had a lust for authority which made his glittering career and incalculable impact on history possible, even inevitable. But to seek for the deeds and policies of Moses in any fold or reservoir of his own personality would be hopelessly to miss the point. His story is that of a man seized by an awesome *exterior* force, and moulded to deeds and stories of which he would never have dreamed by himself. In this way he is caught up in God's shepherding of the people he will call to himself; a people whose quality, in its turn, gives similarly little sign of designer-logic or purpose-building. In studying the prophets we should prepare to be puzzled, foxed, and sometimes unnerved by the sheer human strangeness of what takes place. If popular understanding sees prophets simply as persons who foretell the future, we have to say that it certainly hasn't come about through any predictability of their own.

I've isolated four essential factors in the prophetic field which I think will be useful to our study. In this lecture I shall take each of them in turn, and illustrate them from the words and deeds of the various prophets. They are as follows:

- The prophet must **experience the holiness of God** at first hand.
- He must **sense the distance of his people** from this awareness
- He must **proclaim the word from God** with power and creativity
- There must follow a time of **judgment**, a *crisis*.

From each of these four realities other consequences flow, all of which contribute to the ministry and power of the prophet. We shall be recognising as we go that the prophets are in no way to be thought of as monsters or rare birds. What we say of them we shall also be saying of ourselves.

1 **The Prophetic Experience Of God**

The knowledge of God as Other is essential to the prophetic ministry. Self-expression is quite foreign to it. No Biblical prophet is depicted as developing an ambition for the rôle or as desiring it because of some inherent quality or gift. The obvious place to demonstrate this truth is to be found in the literary form of the Prophetic Call. The tremendous scene of Isaiah 6 is set in the Jerusalem Temple, and it is not a comfortable description. The first response of the seer is to sense his unworthiness, not only to be there, but even to live on after having seen his vision. The notion of the angel cleansing his lips with the red-hot coal, and the call of God to prophecy, make us understand that the work of the prophet demands a kind of holiness which is God's gift.

To receive this infused grace permanently changes the prophet's life, throwing past certainties into flux, taking the first place. There is a kind of death involved, which robs his previous existence of its hold, and a rebirth into the significance of the ministry of prophecy. The prophet is a marked man, and his new life bears the sign of his encounter with God.

Jeremiah's call is quieter and more private, almost conversational. His response is to make a noise like a baby ("A...a...a...") and to claim that he cannot speak. God responds by touching his mouth, and by the promise to be with Jeremiah to rescue him; but he speaks to Jeremiah of the trials that will come from his ministry.

Moses is the prime prophetic figure; he too cannot be said to show any personal taste or aptitude for his calling; his approach to the burning bush has more of curiosity about it than of any deep search for religious truth. He objects that he is unrespected by the Israelites and slow of speech, and God waves away these objections, once more by the promise to be with his prophet. One of the strange facts about Moses is the number of narratives by which his first call might be said to be described; any one of them might stand as he first of his contacts with God, and again and again we hear the theme of his unworthiness or unfitness to receive such a call. In one of these accounts he is comforted by God with the gift of Aaron, the priest, who will be in turn the interpreter of Moses. It has to be said that the hierarchic rôle of priest has seldom sat easily with the charism of prophecy². Clearly the author of this piece of "consolation" must have been at least a Levite himself.

The quality of holiness which flows from the "privileged" religious experience of the prophets is unmistakable; and it is often accompanied by a depth of eloquence and poetry which generates some of the most moving religious language in existence. This does much to give the great prophets their enormous aura and impressiveness. They are not comfortable to be with, and often they are not comfortable with their calling. One of the most famous instances is that of Jeremiah. His description of his inner feelings is deeply moving (Jer 20:7ff). The language is quietly extreme:

*You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced;
you have overpowered me, you were the stronger.
I am a laughing-stock all day long, they all make fun of me.
For whenever I speak I have to howl and proclaim, "Violence and ruin!"
For me the word of the Lord has been the cause
of insult and derision all the day long.*

*I would say to myself, "I will not think about him,
I will not speak in his name any more."
But then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones.
The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it.*

² One excepts the early example of Samuel, who seemed to unite in his own person the roles of priest, judge, and prophet. Later things separated out, and the concerns of priests did not often match those of prophets. Particularly is this so in the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, where there were no true (Levitical) priests, and where the religious leadership was not in the consecrated hands of the Davidic King, but in the unpredictable hands of spontaneous prophetic figures like Elijah, unafraid to contradict the words (and colourful ways) of the Kings of Samaria.

2 The Prophetic Sense Of Israel's Distance From God

Perhaps the last point is integral to the next: that Israel has wandered away from the One who saves it is the general awareness of all the prophets. Once more, it isn't only prophets who feel this to be true. We can read in the Psalter a prayer which would express the heart of many a prophet (69:7f)

*It is for you that I bear insults, my face is covered with shame.
I am estranged from my own brothers, alienated from my own mother's sons:
for I am consumed with zeal for your house, and taunts against you fall on me.*

Isaiah's cry of pain in the presence of the seraphim is eloquent of the same sense (6:5):

*Woe is me! I am lost!
For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips,
and my eyes have looked on the King, the Lord of Armies.*

The first inspiration that comes to Jeremiah in his book³ is about apostasy among his people: God says of them (1:15f)

*I shall pronounce my judgments on them because of all their wickedness,
since they have abandoned me,
offering incense to other gods, and worshipping what their own hands have made.*

Amos, among the earliest of the writing prophets, is filled with horror at the derelictions of Israel, and particularly its sudden access of wealth and power (both Egypt and Assyria, the twin scourges of Israel, were otherwise occupied in the days of Amos, and the Israelites found themselves left in peace to become luxurious and selfish. It is amazing how modern some of his strictures sound).

No-one can approach the disgust for Israel expressed by Ezekiel. His experience of the reduction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar colours his whole religion with loathing for sin, which he sees as having brought the destruction of the Holy Land and its traditions, the city of David, the Throne, the Temple of Solomon, the ancestral bond between tribes and their territories, the custom and ceremony of sacrifice and festival. His memory is of a thoughtless Israel, air-headed and slipshod, the partner in crime of every pagan seducer. To read from Ezk 20 to 23 is to sense that the prophet is almost beside himself with horror and shame at the reekingly irreligious tone of the national life. We may recall that the prophet Isaiah went naked through the streets of Jerusalem for six months, because he saw the naked lack of trust in God which had the Davidic king seeking alliances with earthly princes to try to secure his tottering throne.

A short meditation on these and many other passages will help us to see that the prophet is being called to keep faith with the holiness of God, and still not to desert the

³ Perhaps it would be timely to note from the beginning that the prophetic books are not literary units in their present form, but collections: in other words they draw their structure *as books* from their *editors* rather than from the prophets themselves. This throws something of a spanner in our direction, since we have to read the minds of the editors (i.e. practice redaction criticism) as well as trying to read the minds of the prophets themselves. St Paul, we may feel, is less complicated!

morally bankrupt people to whom he belongs. God's will is to bridge the gulf between holiness in heaven and depravity on the earth. It is the prophet's task to be the human symbol of this bridging of the gulf. The prophets know that they belong to the human family, and must bear their share of its shame; they also know that the hand of God has been laid upon them, and they must seek purity of heart in response. In some mysterious way they are to represent the faithfulness of God to men, and on the other hand to represent whatever they can of fidelity and obedience to the Covenant. So the vicarious representation of the people is already becoming part of the prophetic self-understanding. It will bear great and significant fruit in the writings of the second Isaiah, so cardinaly important for the self-understanding of Jesus. It is easy to see in this context the link which has often been drawn between the inspiration of the prophets and the book (and source) we know as Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy *A Purple Passage*

Careful watchers will have noticed that when we studied the four Sources of the Pentateuch we read carefully the accounts of the Exodus, and isolated the characteristics within it of the Jahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly source. But there was a certain reserve about Deuteronomy. This was partly because the D source doesn't crop up in Exodus; but partly too because, having its own eponymous book, and being so separately influential, it seemed to deserve some time to itself. It is in the context of the prophets that we most need to learn about this source and its outstanding qualities, which the prophets in one way, and the histories in another, often echo.

The name implies "second Law". As the "first" Law (the Mosaic Torah) grounded the transition from nomadism to the settling of the Promised Land, so Deuteronomy acts as a kind of jolt to the memory of the *exiles* - and the *returning* exiles - of the ancestral values that may have seemed to many Jews to have scant relevance to their greatly changed situation. It was in learning to endure the Exile that the Judaeans turned their disastrous misfortune to good account. The *spiritualising* of the Torah, in the absence of monarchy, Temple and Land, was a tremendous achievement for survival. Its success rested on a massively conservative attitude to the passage of time, whose influence is still visible in the lives of traditional Jews to this day. In Deuteronomy we can hear the voice which enabled this keeping of the Covenant. The voice, of course, is the voice of Moses himself, who is depicted in the Book of Deuteronomy as delivering his last will and testament on the threshold of the Promised Land. He himself, the man of God in the desert, is not to enter Canaan. But from the desert came the lessons which taught Israel to be the people of God.

As we would expect, in contrast to the pantheon of Babylon, it is the dramatic and vital *monotheism* of Deuteronomy that strikes us at all points. If we seek for the theme of monotheism in the Old Testament, the other great sourcebook is unquestionably prophetic: the second Isaiah (Is 40 - 55). Here the oneness of God is proclaimed as the repeated mantra which sums

up everything the Exile has taught the exiles. Deuteronomy has its formulae, much more than mere slogans: the formula which has become the Creed of Israel, recited at least thrice daily, is Dt 6:4ff:

*Listen Israel: the Lord our God is the One, the only Yahweh.
You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your strength*

Deutero-Isaiah contains passages which similarly enjoin monotheism as the essential and only true ground of a good life (Is 45:21ff):

*There is no other god except me, no saving God – no Saviour except me!
Turn to me and you will be saved, all you ends of the earth,
for I am God, there is no other.
By my own self I swear it: what comes from my mouth is saving justice,
an irrevocable word:
all shall bend the knee to me, by me every tongue shall swear,
saying “In Yahweh alone are saving justice and strength,”
until all those who used to rage at him come to him in shame.
In Yahweh the whole race of Israel finds justice and glory.*

Deutero-Isaiah is concerned to resurrect the purity and freshness of the Exodus; but it will not be a remembered joy. “Show us again wonders”: it will be the renewed experience of the same power that was stretched forth over the slaves in Egypt that is known by the slaves in Babylon (43:16ff):

*Thus says Yahweh,
who made a way through the sea, a path in the raging waters,
who led out chariot and horse together with an army of picked troops:
they lay down never to rise again, snuffed out like a wick.
No need to remember past events, no need to think about what was done
before. Look, I am doing something new: now it emerges: can you not see
it?
Yes, I am making a road in the desert, and rivers in wastelands.
The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches,
for bestowing water in the desert and rivers in the wastelands
for my people, my chosen one, to drink.
The people I have shaped for myself will broadcast my praises.*

The duty of remembrance gives Deuteronomy much of its conservative tone; despite the insistence on the current relevance of the faith, it is very much the ancestral faith that is proposed, along with a ground bass of reminders of the inadequacy of former responses: Moses is constantly making mention of the derelictions of the past, and encouraging the new devotion which will be required of those who inherit the land they are about to cross the Jordan to enter. The actual recipients of Deuteronomy were living seven centuries later, but they too are exhorted to return to the Holy Land with a new devotion. The phrase *never forget the deeds of God* sets the tone of Dt 4, a good example of the paraenesis Dt embodies. It would be worth reading this

chapter carefully as a foil to your reading among the prophets. Dt 6 embodies remembrance and loyalty to the covenant, and the duty of tradition – to hand on unchanged what we have received from our fathers. Note that Jesus quotes from Dt 6 – 8 in the temptation passages of Mt 4 and Lk 4.

I think with these themes in mind it would be a good idea to read through Deuteronomy, at a businesslike pace, noting as you go the precise tonality – remembrance, obedience, seriousness, unquestioning acceptance of God alone as the source and purpose of our living. It is a book about the sanctity that is proper for the people God has addressed and called to himself. The promises will be kept, and the clear lesson of the past is that we must learn how to be holy and single-minded in our turn. By retaining this message your mind will be prepared for the sense of holiness that sustains the prophets; to which end you should pay special attention to Dt 18:9-22.

דְּבַר

3 The Declaration Of The Prophetic Word From God

I have already remarked that the spiritual integrity of the prophets gives rise to some of the most sublime and heartfelt *poetry* in existence. The simplest of these men respond to their inspiration with a creativity and spiritual eloquence which should make all who read them understand very quickly how dramatic and powerful the experiences are that they have had. What marks this literature above all is its palpable integrity, the unified world-picture, the sureness of judgment of its authors. They experience perplexity and sometimes dread because of the dangerous situations they are called to enter and change. But their awareness that it is God who commands them is unshakeable. They do not have religious doubts in the modern sense of the word. They benefit (or suffer, according to your point of view) from the black-and-white clarity which characterises Hebrew thought and language; the culture of the Scripture is not interested in grey areas or in the kind of paralysed angst that comes from unclear concepts and divided minds. Once more, they ascribe this firmness of mind not to themselves or any quality of theirs, but to the eternal Word that has addressed them. Jeremiah again (Jer 1:17f):

*As for you, prepare yourself for action.
Stand up and tell them all that I command you.
Have no fear of them, and in their presence I will make you fearless.
For look: today I have made you into a fortified city,
a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze to stand against the whole country:
the kings of Judah, its princes, the priests and the people of the country.
They will fight against you but will not overcome you:
for I am with you, the Lord declares, to rescue you.*

We have been considering the prophetic proclamation exclusively in verbal terms; but there are two other media which must be taken into account. The first is the symbolic prophetic act; the second is the life of the prophet itself.

Symbolic Prophetic Acts

The spirit often leads the prophets into actions which express instantly and vividly the message the prophet has to deliver. We saw how when the kings of Judah were attempting to secure their future by making alliances and conducting intrigues against the regular threat of the North, with Gentile kings the prophet Isaiah decided to expose the nakedly faithless programme, not only by proclaiming it as such, but by taking off his own clothes and wandering naked through the streets of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah frequently has prophetic experience that leads him to perform public acts which capture the attention of his compatriots. They are the fruit of a deeply imaginative inner dialogue with God, in which the common sights and experiences of the prophet's day become eloquent of his vocation; he is clearly beginning to see his whole world as alive with communication from God: from the outset his book is full of these "seeings"⁴ (Jer 1:13ff):

Jeremiah: I see a cooking-pot boiling, tilting from the North.

God: From the North disaster will come boiling over on all who live in the land

When his prediction of the invasion of Jerusalem is disbelieved, Jeremiah takes a huge pottery vessel and publicly and dramatically smashes it (Jer 19) with the oracle

The Lord of Hosts says this: I am going to break this people and this city,
so that they can never be mended again

It is one thing to hear that the city is going to be violently destroyed: quite another to hear the first sound of smashing domestic vessels actually taking place. Jeremiah makes his prediction of the enslavement of his people, not only by words, but by himself assuming a large wooden yoke, tied on his shoulders with thongs of leather. He makes himself the first victim of what he proclaims.

Ezekiel conducts similar dramas in the sight of his compatriots: most movingly, he mimes the Exile itself, dressing as a displaced person, carrying a pitiful bundle, he makes a hole in the city wall and leaves by it: he makes himself the first exile. The act of piercing the city's defences to make his exit is daringly subversive.

It seems to me that there lies buried in these significant deeds a foreshadowing of the theology of the Incarnation itself; after all, they cause the prophetic word to become flesh, to become manifest to the senses and in the physical realm, just as the Word of God becomes palpably human in Jesus. Such an understanding of the prophetic mind seems valid to me, in that the prophets are consciously wedding their personal life to

⁴ Before the prophets are associated with their message, and thus with proclamation and with the word, they are being defined as "seers", working through inspired visions and delivering oracles to those who consulted them. The note of clairvoyance and even necromancy was early discredited and shunned by prophets: Saul is depicted as having outlawed such people, yet he himself consults the so-called witch of Endor on the night before his death in battle.

the message they proclaim. This brings us to the second mode of prophetic proclamation: the way in which the prophet's life is given over to the Word.

The Prophet Himself Becomes A Sign

Several of the prophets find themselves issued with a deeply personal call to embody the Word in their personal, social, and sexual lives. Jer 16:1:

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me as follows:

You are not to marry, or have sons and daughters in this place. For Yahweh says this regarding the sons and daughters to be born in this place, about the mothers who give birth to them, and about the fathers who beget them in this land: They will die of deadly diseases, unlamented and unburied: they will be like dung spread on the ground; they will meet their end by sword and famine, and their corpses will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of earth.

We have had our minds blunted by centuries of clerical celibacy, and fail to hear in this injunction to the prophet's celibacy the scandalous and counter-cultural thing that it is. There is no honoured place in Israel for celibacy. The prophet Hosea has an even more desperate rôle to play (Ho 1:2):

The Lord said to Hosea: Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore; for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh.

The prophet instantly knows that the devastation of his marital experience is going to be matched by terrible parental experiences too. In these experiences the deepest of his personal experiences are recruited to the task of proclamation; Hosea is to be an image of the God who has been betrayed by Israel. This is deeply shocking thought. That the Eternal God should be depicted as cuckolded, and still besotted by the venal woman he has been foolish enough to fall for, implies a quite extraordinary theological boldness and originality in this writer.

There is a still more original mode of thought present here, in that Hosea daringly recruits the forbidden⁵ form of anthropomorphism to depict God. The image is of God as a disappointed husband, plotting and engineering to win back a wife whose attention has wandered disastrously. Even more startling is the presentation of God as a failed parent, muttering over the derelictions of his sons who have deserted him in his old age. Then, in one of the most superb contradictions of the Old Testament, when the human emotions are most powerfully predicated of God, this happens (Ho 11:7ff):

Ephraim, how could I part with you?
Israel, how could I give you up?
...my heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being.
I will not give rein to my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim again:
for I am God, not man,
the Holy One in your midst:
and I shall not come to you in anger.

⁵ Forbidden by the first commandment of the Decalogue

The prophet retains all the power of the anthropomorphic representation of God, whilst at the same time contradicting it (*I am God, not man*).

One of the factors we ought to notice about this “incarnational” theme is that it is *costly* to the prophet himself: in other words, because of the way human nature is constructed, the way in which the Word becomes flesh in the prophet’s life costs him a sacrifice, the sacrifice of himself in favour of the word of God. In the realms of eternity this sacrifice – the pouring-out of selfhood – is the very life of the persons of the Holy Trinity, and it is the source of the mutual joy which lies at the heart of the Godhead. For human beings, however, it is agonisingly painful and costly, and shares the nature of death to do this. God enables us to understand what it means by lifting up our nature to divine deeds by the virtues, those strengths for goodness which flow to us from God and which, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, can become sacramental, in other words, can lead us into divine life. When Jesus takes our flesh he becomes subject to the same law: as divine Son he expresses himself perfectly only by pouring himself out in trustful obedience to the Father. As human being he meets the resistance of life lived in the flesh – his own, and that of others: the political, social, psychological minefields which cross and confuse human experience; and his pouring himself out becomes the agony in the garden, the Passion and Cross, in our sense of the word, *sacrificial*. His self-giving means death. This is the huge reality which the experience of the prophets prefigures. This presence of death is what gives the prophet ultimate seriousness, the capacity to proclaim with total authority.

4 **The Prophet Provokes A Judgment**

That the deeds of the true prophet should bear fruit in judgment is part of the sequence. *That the prophets of God should be found worthy of belief* is the ardent prayer of the poor, since their hope is in vindication from on high; the poor hear the prophecies of doom with hope, because they denounce the oppression and injustice which threatens them; they hear the prophecies of restoration with joy, because they are charters for their inheritance. There is a further consideration here, which should be studied carefully. Because prophecy was a respected dimension of Israel’s religion, it became simultaneously an important political area too. In the southern kingdom, where the Davidic king reigned with divine sanction, prophets were gathered within the sacred precinct of the court; it is perfectly credible that the herald of God should speak from the side of his anointed shepherd, the king. In the North the kings were usurpers, ruling with no divine sanction and themselves in daily dread of deposition. Having little need to display godliness, they became what Middle-Eastern princelings have always been, venal and time-serving; in the North the prophets became the scourge of the monarchs, speaking from outside the camp, denouncing all that was unworthy of the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Of the Northern Prophets Elijah, with his lifelong and bitter battle against Ahab and the appalling Tyrean queen Jezebel, is the antetype.^{1K22} is a magnificent account of the atmosphere of the Samarian court. It ends with the definitive judgment of God against Ahab.

All of this was certain to provoke a reaction; and the response of the kings – not only in Samaria but in Judah too - was to recruit prophets who would accept pay to speak more comfortably. We can see a typical example in the story of Jeremiah’s battle over the

yoke against the court prophet Hananiah (Jer 27 – 28). The principle announced by Jeremiah is simple (28:8f):

From remote times, the prophets who preceded you and me prophesied war, disaster and plague for many countries and for great kingdoms.
The prophet who prophesies peace can be recognised as one truly sent by Yahweh only when his word comes true.

So there is no rest for the prophet: he too lives in peril, as the word he has been inspired to speak hangs in the balance, he awaits the judgment he has provoked as anxiously as those he has addressed. The denouement of the situation depends on God. Jonah has to put up with a situation where God appears to have changed his mind in response to the Ninevites' repentance. The prophet cannot fly into a rage at this; the prophet serves God, not God the prophet. For the most part, however, the prophets are vindicated by the fulfilment of their words, and judgment is indeed passed on the situations they denounce. The true prophet is a wild card for the politician who attempts to use him; this is evinced in the story of Balaam, who despite his Gentile provenance – he is a Zoroastrian stargazer – is a prophet inspired by the true God, and he cannot speak an untruth even for great reward (Numbers 22 – 24).

You cannot waste time in studying the prophets. There are backwaters and creases and folds in the Bible which do not repay enormously the attention we lavish on them. The prophets of Israel, by contrast, are the most consistently impressive class of religious characters in the Scripture. In comparison with the kings they represent a purity of heart and selflessness of motive that is near the heart of the Judaeo-Christian faith, and their mystical dimension remains the fact that startlingly anchors them to reality. They believe in the God who addresses them, and they adhere to their calling with sometimes dazzling fidelity and immense poetic eloquence. Their burning integrity is their own letter of credit, and they are immense figures whose impact on the seriousness of the faith can quite simply not be overstated.

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