

Biblical Prophets' Anti-Corruption Vocation

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Since the beginning of creation, God has not left humanity to itself. He maintained a cordial relationship with human beings. In spite of the unfortunate incident of humanity's disobedience recorded in Genesis, which marred this relationship, this did not destroy it. God evolved a master plan of salvation, which unfurled through the years and was made known to humankind through the prophets!

In the biblical narrative we notice that prophets became known primarily as the mediators of God's revelation to his people throughout the ages. Unfortunately the word 'prophet' has become such a generic term that embraces the many and various ways humankind has endeavoured to communicate with the supernatural. Even so, it is regrettable that some of these means are objectively outright weird, even queer and degenerative. In most cases, especially here in Zimbabwe, some people are inclined to think of a prophet as one who is orientated towards the future, predicting what is to happen in the future! In fact that is not the case. The message of the biblical prophet is essentially for the present. He speaks to the actual situation of his people, and this explains the tone of urgency throughout all the prophetic literature. Without doubt, some biblical prophets on occasion made predictions, but

basically because future events are formed by present reactions. God is always at work in the making of history. Man, by his reaction to God now, influences the course of future events. So, the permanent value of prophecy lies in the fact that revelation is at work in history while humankind contributes too.

In whatever world one may find oneself, the basic inequality in human existence, the unfairness of things, corruption, violence, injustice, suffering and all sorts of ailments torment people. At the present moment the world is gripped by the pandemic of coronavirus, which has claimed thousands of lives. Unfortunately, it may appear as if the world does not make sense, and man can feel lost in it. Prophecy then becomes an exegesis of this human existence; an effort at interpreting man and his world from the Divine perspective, that is, the existence of a God involved actively with his people. This is why the prophetic message often appears as one long tirade against sin and loose living. So the essence of the prophetic vocation is that the prophet sees the world from God's point of view. Accordingly, for example, when they hold forth about man's conduct, as in the case of corruption - they cannot see it as relative guilt. The prophet has to see it from God's point of view!

When we look at prophets today, as they should be looked at, they are supposed to be living examples of the impact of God on human life. In them we should see people who have experienced God. The core of prophecy lies not in the fact that a prophet is a moral leader, or a teacher - but in the fact that he presents to this age the tension between God and a man. God is the focal point of existence and of experience. So the prophet is the person in whose own life the contradictions of human experience are incarnated. The prophet is indeed God's voice ... one who stands in God's presence. He can confront God on behalf of his people, and often does [cf. Amos 7, 2]. He is also God's witness, not his own witness; his task is not to announce, but to bear witness or testimony; to be! A prophet does not need to prove anything. He makes God present, and when you meet God the decision becomes yours! A very good example of this is Elijah; who is the prototype of prophecy. He is often designated 'ish ha 'elohim - man of God. This is so, because he brings together God and man.

Biblical prophecy is also concerned with everyday holiness. A prophet must be a *persona religiosa* - a religious person - one who is considered a model of holiness, scholarship and closeness to God. Biblical prophets set the standards for the entire community



- so should modern day prophets! Certainly, the one thing that is critical about the prophetic vocation is that you can ignore the prophet's preaching or message, but you cannot ignore the prophet. The prophet's message and word, then is one of challenge and response. His main vocation is to declare, not to achieve. Like I have already said, he does not need to predict - as we seem to see happening in our contemporary society.

The mission of the prophet is to exhort. He announces God's disdain against injustice, corruption or any malice of any nature. In the case of biblical prophets, they were not, in fact, creators of a new theology or of a new religion. Instead, they were products of a religion already established. They were people who lived within a given tradition or culture, but who saw straight to the one

essential of that religion. In our contemporary society, corruption has become a huge concern. If the culture of corruption is breeding death in the community, the prophet's voice need to be heard - since the voice of the prophet is the voice of God!

Nevertheless, prophets must first be true disciples of their faith. In fact, it is their deep love for their tradition that allows them to criticize this malady called corruption. Faith and deep love for God is almost always the hallmark of a true prophet. And if they criticise corruption, their deepest motivation is not negative but profoundly positive. The dualistic mind presumes that if you criticize something, you don't love it, but the opposite should be said. There is a major difference between negative criticism and

positive critique. The first stems from the need for power; the second flows from love.

Institutions, especially some political ones, often prefer loyalists to prophets. Some people would be seen to be uncomfortable with those who point out their shortcomings or imperfections, but human consciousness does not emerge at any depth except through struggling with our shadow and contradictions. It is in the struggle with our shadow self, with failure, or with wounding that we are transformed and break into higher levels of consciousness. People who learn to expose, name, and still thrive inside of a world filled with contradictions are what we would call prophets. They are both faithful and critical.

Prophets are people who speak

out when others remain silent. They criticize their own society, their own country, or their own religious institutions. Sometimes this leads inevitably to tension and even some measure of conflict between the prophet and the establishment. In the Hebrew Scriptures we see how the prophets clashed with kings and sometimes priests too. Jesus was painfully aware of this tension or conflict in the traditions of the prophets. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you ... for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets" [Luke 6:22-23]. Jesus also saw those who killed the prophets in the past as the ancestors or predecessors of the scribes and Pharisees [Matthew 23:29-35].

The tension or conflict is between authority and experience. True prophets are not part of the authority structure of their society or their religious institution. Unlike priests and kings, prophets are never appointed, ordained, or anointed by the religious establishment. They experience a special calling that comes directly from God, and their message comes from their experience of God: "Thus says the Lord God."

We have seen how boldly and radically Jesus spoke out against the assumptions and practices of the social and religious establishment of his time. He turned their world upside down. The conflict that this created became so intense that in the end they killed him to keep him quiet. Any attempt

to practice the same spirituality as Jesus would entail learning to speak truth to power as he did—and facing the consequences.

From what I have been trying to highlight, certain general conclusions on the scope and characteristics of prophets and prophecy may be drawn. A prophet is appointed by God. This person is responsible only to God, whose word he was chosen to communicate. This is his *raison d'être*. In this way, he can confidently come to any person, and point the finger to say 'Thus say the Lord God'. And since the prophetic insight is a Spirit-inspired understanding of some aspect of the life of the community, it has of itself an importance even beyond the limits of the actual, and local, historical community, that is the first recipient of the word.

Most basic of all to the prophet is the covenant faith, his religious tradition. Again here, Elijah remains an example of how zeal for the Covenant must be the theological core of the prophetic tradition. Just as Elijah experienced an actual return to the source of the Covenant [1 Kings 19, 9ff] by encounter with God at Sinai, so the prophet is one who remains in spirit faithful to his theological sources. In this sense, the prophet is not really an innovator, but a renewer; one who sees to the core of the religious reality.

True prophets arise not of their own accord but are constituted so by God. It is God's concern for his people, their well-being that God

raises prophets to give his message to His People. The distinguishing criterion of a true or false prophet then becomes the source and content of his message. Therefore the source of all true prophecy is God's concern. It is this concern which initiates the prophetic movement in the Bible. God speaking to Moses, in the book of Exodus says "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt ... I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians ... So come I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt" (3, 7 – 10) This is indeed the source of true prophecy, God's loving concern.

Prophets must be sensitive to what God wants now, in their own situation in world history and can be interrogated by men. It is a fact that human history is dominated by God, in that he gives man the option of meeting him in his own history and finding there the economy of salvation. This is the mission of each individual among God's people. Biblical prophets were neither 'progressives' nor 'conservatives', 'radicals' nor 'rebels'; they served neither king/president nor political group. They were witnesses to divine justice. If they were influenced at all from outside it was by the desert tradition, and Covenant tradition: of care for the widows and the poor, the homeless and the oppressed, and those of any class who were victims of social injustice and corruption!