

Hope and rejoicing

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Sunday 11 July 2021 in St Peter's
Readings: *Amos 7.7-15 Ephesians 1.3-14 Mark (6.14-29)*

Like last week's readings, today's passages tell us something about 'Prophets'. A prophet is someone inspired by God to pass on his message to his people – a 'mediator' if you like, of God's word. Today we often talk of 'prophets of doom' – not just the people who say Italy will win tonight! but often in the context of global warming, the economy. But they are only true prophets if their message comes directly from God himself. Frequently today, however, their message is inspired by scientific data! Of course, God is in the scientific facts that are collected, but the interpretation of those facts is not always from God. If it were, we might not have so many conflicting pieces of advice as a result!

So, prophets receive God's word and try to pass it on to the people. And we do tend to think of them as bringing very negative, gloomy, messages. But this isn't the case. What the prophets have always done is remind people of the way God wants us to behave, and the various consequences of our behaviour... good as well as bad. For Amos, this meant reminding people of the covenant promises they signed up to. If they were faithful to God, following his commandments, then God would look after them which is what he longed to do!. If they weren't, he wouldn't!

And God was always watchful. He didn't make and remake the covenant and then go off on holiday somewhere, or forget about it – as the Israelites had done. He told Amos that he was measuring the behaviour of his people, and the 'plumb-line' showed God that they were no longer upright. So God told Amos to warn them that unless they changed their ways, he would destroy them. And, of course, they didn't like it. No one likes being told they are in the wrong.

And we hear most about the prophets when they are speaking up about people's wrong-doing – and bringing dire warnings of catastrophe. There is no real need for prophets when everything is going well, when people are remaining faithful to God. No wonder, then, we have this rather negative view of them, whereas, in fact, what they are trying to do is to bring people back to their God, so that they are taken care of and put back in right relationship with God. And this is what John the Baptist was trying to do.

John called people to repentance, to put them back on track with God, and he was not afraid to keep on challenging Herod about the way he had disobeyed the Law of God. So Herod didn't like it, and wanted to be rid of him, even though in his heart of hearts he knew that John was right.

And what about St Paul? We don't usually think about him as a prophet – but he was surely a very great prophet. He spent the part of his life after his conversion, trying to come as close to God as he possibly could – through the Christ he had met on that Damascus Road. So, his words were truly inspired by God himself. And he tried to pass on that same message – that if we are faithful to God, he will look after us. But his reference point wasn't that Old Testament Mosaic Law with its hundreds of rules and regulations. Paul didn't for one minute dismiss this Law – he was deeply grounded in it (as indeed was Jesus himself). And some of the things he gets into trouble with amongst Christians today are rooted in that old Law. They were appropriate to his time but not for ours. But God had revealed something to Paul that went far beyond this ancient Law. He had revealed that salvation was tied up with Christ - his death and his resurrection.

And so Paul's prophetic message was that salvation/redemption was no longer a question of ticking off a list of rules, rather it was a question of having faith in God, through Jesus Christ. This didn't mean that we could go off and do anything we liked. Our words and actions had to be rooted in love. The commandments that really mattered were to love one's neighbour, and to love God. To be 'righteous' – right with God – we need to do everything we can to be like Christ... to be 'in Christ'. And one of the wonderful things about Paul's message is his assurance over and over again that doing something wrong isn't the end of the story. Paul recognised our vulnerability as human beings more than anyone, and so constantly reminded us that getting things wrong was part of being human, and that God understood this, and if we are prepared to acknowledge the things we have

done wrong, and are truly sorry for them (which may involve reconciliation with someone else) we can trust God to forgive us. Then we can get on with our lives, rather than being weighed down constantly with guilt.

So Paul's New Testament prophetic message is primarily one of hope and rejoicing. He didn't say that putting our trust in Jesus Christ would make everything easy in our lives, Paul knew very well the pains and problems of life, but he knew that God, through Christ, would support us through the difficult times, and he knew that eventually we would receive wonderful things if we try to follow Christ and remain faithful to him. And Paul's message is always underpinned by his total certainty that God loves us unconditionally. We may do things to mess up our relationship with him, but this doesn't stop his loving us, and longing for us to get back into right relationship.

Paul travelled thousands of miles to proclaim his message of hope, and he wrote many amazing letters – which come down to us today. Our wonderful reading from his letter to the Ephesians sets out this message. It tells us that God has blessed us with every spiritual/heavenly blessing; that God chose us right from the beginning of time to be holy and blameless in his sight through love and to be his children; that God wants to pour his amazing grace upon us, and so through his Son's death and passion, we can have forgiveness of sins. Paul tells us that God planned to gather everything up in Christ in the fullness of time, so those people who hear Christ's message and set their hope on it, should live to his glory and praise. And, it is by believing in his word of truth, his gospel of salvation that we receive the Holy Spirit and God's absolute promise of salvation.

Paul, as with all the prophets, gives us a message of enormous hope and rejoicing if we are prepared to accept God's love and guidance and try to live as Christ lived. Doom and gloom only come about if we harden our hearts to God and his offer of unconditional love.

Amen