

### Advent 3 2017

*Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good.*

Prophets are those who are inspired by the Spirit; they are therefore passionate, emotional, full of fire; they live at the edge of human rationality and are easily confused with the insane, the deranged and the deluded. They are easily despised as enthusiasts, religious nutcases or extremists. Hence St Paul's advice: 'do not despise the words of the prophets' – easy to do. But neither does he say 'believe everything they may say'. Just because someone is passionate or enthusiastic or hyperspiritual doesn't mean they're right – not even me. Paul says 'don't despise them' but 'test everything': in other words, be critical, but not cynical. 'Hold fast to what is good' however much the cultured despiser in you tells you to avoid enthusiasts.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me' cried out a voice 600 years before Christ, one of many prophetic voices. The prophets recorded in the bible are a very small subsection of those who were termed prophets in their day. They were often, perhaps always, minority voices, speaking a line against the consensus. But their disciples kept their words, treasured them, memorised them, wrote them down, in some cases adding to the body of prophecy generations later within prophetic schools that looked back to a master prophet such as Isaiah. If you've been following the daily readings on the pewsheet you will have been immersed in Isaiah over these past few weeks. There is no better way of tuning into the themes of the coming kingdom, the season of Advent and the Christmas story. Though often despised in his own day, Isaiah's words, and those of his successors, won the attention of future generations who saw the truth of his judgments and the uncanny resonances of his prophetic visions when heard again both within their original context and in new historical circumstances.

Some of the words of Old Testament reading have an uncanny resonance even this week as the nation has commemorated the dreadful events of six months ago when a tower block burst into flames and went into meltdown destroying the lives and hopes of scores of its residents.

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted...  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion –  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning...  
They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations.*

You may remember that these words were quoted by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth but not just quoted, also reimagined, reapplied and taken as his own manifesto: 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me'. Oh, oh – another of those enthusiasts, religious nutcases or extremists; one who speaks as a prophet aflame with the Spirit, one who approached the holy city of Jerusalem and cried out 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.' Cities don't kill religious enthusiasts because they think they're mad or because they might overly incite spiritual fervour. No, they get rid of people who a threat to their power base. Jesus wasn't crucified for comforting the bereaved and lovelorn. Not even the most tyrannical regimes execute people for providing counselling services or health clinics. The Red Cross may have lots of heroes who have worked for it but not a long list of martyrs. What antagonised the powerful about Jesus wasn't his kindness but the authority with which he taught and the way that he seemed to empower those who were formerly powerless. You may remember earlier in the year that I spoke about Bethany,

the village outside Jerusalem where Jesus seemed to stay and have close friends, including Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It is most likely that Bethany means 'house of the poor' and it may well have been a place of poor-houses and hostels for the sick and the unclean – it was far enough away from Jerusalem, and out of its view, to fit the regulations for keeping away the unclean from the Temple. There is some evidence that the poorhouses were founded by the Essenes, proto-monastic communities that trained disciples and practised austerity and often celibacy – the sort of religious formation you can imagine John the Baptist coming from. The Qumran community may have been such a community, living in the caves by the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, a sort of monastic library. These religious ascetics lived in the desert, the wilderness. They may even have founded a string of poorhouses, hence the second Bethany we heard of in the gospel reading, the other side of the Jordan where John was based and where he baptised. He prepared the way for another; he galvanised a generation into seeing that God was doing a new thing, something was about to happen equal or perhaps greater in significance than the crossing of the Red Sea and the river Jordan by the children of Israel of old. All kinds of people came out to be baptised by John but leading the way were Bethany people – the poor, the sick, the despised, the oppressed:

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed*

And that same Spirit of the Lord can be upon us too, in our day, and perhaps has even been upon the Bishop of Kensington and others in the response to the fire of Grenfell Tower. I must say that I was a little bit proud of the Church of England that, instead of being grand and establishment and aloof, somehow for once our better side shone through. Because we are part of the establishment we were able to bridge the gap between the establishment and those who are rightly angry at a system that pays more attention to moneyed voices than to those that speak from council flats. I thought the style of the service, its participants and some of the carefully chosen words, enabled grief to be acknowledged, prophetic words to be spoken and the good news to be heard. The bible reading was from the opening of the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

They were there – and they heard good news. And a prophetic voice spoke to the powers-that-be.

The Church of England doesn't always get it right. It's possible that it's got it wrong in the Bishop George Bell case, for those who have followed that story. But then the church is also accused of ignoring the voices of the abused in other cases and some of its past failures in preventing abuse have been lamentable and shameful. Perhaps it needs to learn the same lesson that Paul gave about listening to prophets. I've changed one word from the text:

*Do not despise the words of witnesses, but test everything; hold fast to what is good.*