

Ministry of the Word: Prophets

Second Sunday Special

11 September 2016

Jer. 1.1, 4-9

Jer. 7.1-11

Mark 11.15-17

Ezek. 34.11-16a

Introduction

There are, broadly speaking, two types of prophet in the OT. There are those like Elijah or Elisha, who did spectacular deeds; and there are those who mainly wrote – or at least whose *words* were written down for them. We have for example, examples of their sermons or pronouncements, often presented as “the word of the Lord”. I shall look at the written prophets today, and I want to demonstrate three things.

- Prophets often *challenge* us when things are not right
- But they also often bring words of *comfort* and reassurance from God
- And thirdly, Jesus himself knew and understood the ancient prophets, and some of his words and actions clearly echo their messages. As modern Christians we need to understand the prophets, and appreciate Jesus’ own teaching on these matters.

There are three great written prophets, whose large books lie at the heart of our bibles: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And there are lots of minor ones as well. It would take a very long time to go through them all, so again I shall have to be selective and will focus mainly on Jeremiah and Ezekiel. [Isaiah is a bit more complicated, because scholars now think that there were three prophets who wrote under the name of Isaiah, and at very different times; but that is also a topic for another day].

Jeremiah and Ezekiel, however, were roughly contemporary with each other, and they acted as prophets at a very difficult time in Israel’s history. Since it is Education Sunday I have an excuse for very short history lesson, with one or two dates.

Important dates (BC)	Key events	Prophets
609	Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon	Jeremiah
597	Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (605-562); first deportation of Jewish people to Babylon	Jeremiah Ezekiel (after 593)
587	Destruction of Jerusalem and Temple; further deportations	Ezekiel
538	Persian conquest of Babylon Some Jews start to return to Judah	Isaiah (2nd prophet)

Jeremiah prophesied just before, and during, the time when Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians under the famous King Nebuchadnezzar. And Ezekiel, who

was just a little later, was one of the citizens of Jerusalem who was exiled to Babylon – and he prophesied *from* Babylon.

Readings

God calls young Jeremiah to be a prophet [Jer.1.1, 4-9]

This is the account of what was said by Jeremiah, one of the priests of Anathoth.

The Lord spoke and said to me, “I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.”

I answered, “Sovereign Lord, I don’t know how to speak; I am too young.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say that you are too young, but go to the people I send you to, and tell them everything I command you to say. Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my lips, and said to me: “Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak.”

Jeremiah gives a fiery sermon at the Temple gate. [Jer. 7.1-11]

The Lord sent me to the gate of the Temple where the people of Judah went in to worship. He told me to stand there and announce what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, had to say to them: “Change the way you are living and the things you are doing, and I will let you go on living here. Stop believing those deceitful words, ‘We are safe! This is the Lord’s Temple, this is the Lord’s Temple, this is the Lord’s Temple!’

“Change the way you are living and stop doing the things you are doing. Be fair in your treatment of one another. Stop taking advantage of aliens, orphans and widows. Stop killing innocent people in this land. Stop worshipping other Gods because that will destroy you. If you change I will let you go on living here in the land which I gave to your ancestors as a permanent possession.

“Look, you put your trust in deceitful words. You steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies under oath, offer sacrifices to Baal, and worship Gods that you had not known before. You do these things I hate, and then you come and stand in my presence, in my own Temple, and say ‘We are safe!’ Do you think that my Temple is a hiding place for robbers?”

Six centuries later, Jesus cleared the Temple [Mark.11.15-17]

When he and the disciples arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus went to the Temple and began to drive out all those who were buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the stools of those who sold pigeons, and he would not let anyone carry anything through the Temple courtyards. He then taught the people: “It is written in the Scriptures that God said, ‘My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations.’ But you have turned it into a hideout for robbers.”

Challenge and comfort

Jeremiah's sermon in the Temple was hated by the priests and the leaders of Jerusalem. He was arrested, beaten and left in chains – lucky to escape with his life

For more than twenty years Jeremiah went on warning the people to turn back to God before they were destroyed by the Babylonian enemy. Eventually he was arrested and locked up. Then his enemies at court asked the king if they could throw him into a deep cistern – now empty of water

Jeremiah sank deep into the mire; trapped, he faced death by starvation. Eventually he was rescued and hauled with great difficulty to safety. But all he had prophesied came true; the Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem and eventually broke through the walls, burned the Temple, and all the fine houses. They took all the citizens to Babylon, leaving only the poorest people in the city.

Meanwhile, Ezekiel was prophesying God's word in Babylon

Ezekiel was a very strange prophet with many weird visions: he saw chariots, wheels, fantastic creatures.

His most famous vision was a valley of dry bones, which came back to life: an allegory for God's the promise of new life for the kingdom.

But – less famous – but even more comforting – is the good shepherd passage. Listen carefully to this, and see if you think it is familiar.

"I, the Sovereign Lord, tell you that I myself will look for my sheep and take care of them in the same way as a shepherd takes care of his sheep that were scattered and are brought together again. I will bring them back from all the places where they were scattered on that dark, disastrous day. I will take them out of foreign countries, gather them together, and bring them back to their own land. I will lead them back to the mountains and streams of Israel and will feed them in pleasant pastures. I will let them graze in safety in the mountain meadows and the valleys and in all the green pastures of the land of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will find them a place to rest. I, the Lord, have spoken.

"I will look for those that are lost, bring back those that wander off, bandage those that are hurt, and heal those that are sick."

Does that sound familiar?

It is reminiscent of Psalm 23, certainly; but we can also recall the words of Jesus in John [10.14ff].

I am the Good Shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. There are other sheep...not in the sheepfold. I must bring them too; they will listen to my voice and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

Conclusion

To summarise: prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak out and challenge – often at times of crisis.

But they also remind the people of God that the overall message is one of comfort – comfort in the harshest of circumstances. At times of war or crisis, we should remember we have a God of peace and comfort.

During his ministry, Jesus echoed the prophets of old. He turned the villains out of the Temple, challenging their actions and attitudes; but he also brought comfort to all who trusted in God and acknowledged him as Lord.

And that is the Lord we worship today: Jesus Christ – the same yesterday, today and for ever.