



Diocese of Leeds:
Justice & Peace Commission
For the Common Good in our Common Home



From Seeing to Judging: Renewing the Prophetic Imagination

The second of 3 Talks given
by David McLoughlin,
Emeritus Fellow of Christian Theology, Newman University

Part of our Day of Shared Reflection – ‘Has the Church become a
‘Not for Prophets’ Organisation?’

*Saturday 15 October 2022 at St Robert’s Parish Rooms, Robert Street,
Harrogate*

Diocese of Leeds: Justice & Peace Commission
Hinsley Hall
62 Headingley Lane
Leeds LS6 2BX



As my way into the need for the renewal of **prophetic imagination in our lives** I'll use as a provocation the experience of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the encounter of Moses with the radically free God, Yahweh, from the book of Exodus. And a subversive Psalm number 72!

Prophetic Imagination as Alternative Vision

The prophetic imagination, of figures like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos, always focuses on the present crisis. It brings an alternative eye capable of critiquing and even dismantling the dominant consciousness of the age. It is a consciousness capable of energising individuals and communities. It promises an alternative vision and reality towards which we can work. It recognises that the seeming fixed nature of things e.g. our economic system or our church structures, are not in fact fixed but contingent and dependent on all sorts of scaffolding which are in no sense absolutely secure.

Prophetic imagination as result of Encounter with the living God

Prophetic imagination enables us to discern, to identify and act out alternatives. Critique of the present and energising acts towards a promised and different future, are held in tension because the God we are faithful to is not capable of being tied down, limited, or defined by the present moment or structures. Classically prophetic imagination is born in the encounter of Moses with the voice from the burning bush in the desert in Exodus 3.

Moses the prophet comes into being through that encounter with the utterly free God *Yahweh* – *"I am who I am, I will be who I will be, I will be where I will be"*. Through this encounter and what follows Moses is freed from the fixed religion and fixed Gods and fixed society of Pharaoh and Egypt. He is drawn into a different reality created by *Yahweh*, the utterly free God. And so Moses is enabled to lead a radically **new** social, political reality in response to that call. This new reality is within the freed people founded on the encounter with the free and living God who chooses to come alongside the powerless, in compassion and liberation.

Freedom and the new, versus stability and the same.

The absolute claims of Pharaoh's empire are blown away by the revelation of the freedom of God. And Moses is enabled to begin to conceive an alternative politics of justice and compassion which will lead to the creation of a new people. A people freed by the God of freedom. The Egyptian Gods legitimated an ordered society, the order of the Pharaohs. There those who have are



protected at the expense of those who have not. But the plagues show up the weakness of the god's and the priesthood of Egypt, show up the lack of power underpinning the politics of oppression of the Empire, which had now failed to control its nobodies - the Hebrew slaves.

The myth of Pharaoh's power is revealed and the structures of his empire exposed in their weakness. The alternative religion is based on the divine freedom, dependent on no social reality nor co-opted to any power structure. *Yahweh* acts from *Yahweh's* reality for *Yahweh's* own purpose. The calling of the 12 slave gangs, migrant workers, is the manifestation of a new politics of justice and compassion. It enacts the revelation of the vision of God's freedom. This first people of God lasted as an alternative society for perhaps 250 years. Moses the prophet proposed a religion of God's freedom as opposed to the state religion of order and control. But note the starting point...

Criticism as Grief rather than Analysis

The judgement in prophetic imagination often starts from a people's capacity to grieve (cf:Ex 2:23-25) *"The people of Israel groaned under their bondage and **cried out** for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning..."* Grieving, is the most visceral response to things not being right, like our grieving for Ukraine. It is often the beginning of prophetic imagination and criticism. The word **to cry out, za'ak** in Hebrew, has a double meaning: it is both a cry of misery but also means the filing of an official complaint. There is an expectation that the wrong which has been cried out will be responded to and answered.

This grieving, revealing all is not right, is the first moment in prophetic imagination and critical consciousness, in judgement. This cry which begins our religious history is acknowledged by God: *"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters..."* (Ex 3:7-8). Jesus acknowledges this in his own charter for Disciples: *"Blessed are you that weep now for you shall laugh."* (Lk 6:21). If we can face reality and weep in empathy for the now that is dying and let it go we can become open to the new that God would give. The second harsher part of the text in Luke 6:25 *"Woe (really: cursed) to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep ."* addresses those who want things to stay as they are, they are too bound up in their investment in the present and cannot see where it is leading. But powerful vested interests are always at play to keep us from seeing and grieving and so becoming free for the new.



The risk of choosing the free God

Moses and Aaron know that intercession and prayer to *Yahweh* the God of freedom is at the heart of the identity of this new people. But now, as then, the prophetic imagination doesn't take so easily among those who are used to the stability of servitude. In Ex 5:8 and 15 the Israelite supervisors still turn to the Pharaoh and the God's of Egypt. It takes the cycle of plagues to show how powerless the Empire of Pharaoh and his static god's are. The people see the structures of oppressive power dismantled before their eyes. They find a different focus for their grief. Moses prophetic imagination has begun to help them move out of slavery **towards the risk of the freedom** of the followers of the free God *Yahweh*.

The great German prophetic poet theologian Dorothee Soelle in her wonderful book *Suffering* (1975) shows how the re-direction of grief, addressing cries to where they can be answered rather than where they are ignored, is often the beginning of empowerment. Then a previously powerless people begin to act to make their own history. We see this with Black Americans like Martin Luther King in the Civil rights movement and among the masses of India under the stimulation of Gandhi's teaching of *ahimsa* - **truth force**- non-violent resistance. More recently we see it among the school children inspired by Greta and the young girls who have taken to the streets in Iran since the death of Nika Shahkarmi in Tehran.

The scriptures play on the two cries; that of the people, and that of the Egyptians and Pharaoh whose power is being dismantled around him (cf. Ex 11:6 and 12:30). But too late! A new history had begun which is still being worked out today. A history that does not involve keeping all as it was, but instead opening up to a free and promised future in hope.

The Jewish people would have to relearn this time and again. Above all in the Babylonian exile when 10 of the 12 tribes disappear from history forever. We would be very foolish if we thought the church is free of this judgement and that we will experience the move into the new freedom of the Kingdom of God's Spirit as something easy and simple. The challenge, to die to the old and open to the new in hope, is always a part of the prophetic imagination. Jesus starts his own ministry with this awareness (Mk1:15) *Metaneite!* "Turn your mind and heart around and believe the good news!". This is the real liberating intention of Lent - to end up at Easter seeing differently.



So part of the prophetic imagination seen in the Moses story is to provoke alternative ways of seeing, alternative possibilities to generate hope. The Empire of Egypt believed everything was as it should be, it just had to be maintained, with minimal moving of pieces into new patterns which did not undermine what was already given and possessed. There was no expectation of the new. Just like those who cannot conceive of the renewed ordination of the married and of women as not being part of Tradition. The God of prophetic imagination is not too worried about tradition in this static sense.

The prophet provokes us to imagine and step out towards truly new futures that are not simply derived from past practice. Pope Francis does this in *Laudato Si* stretching traditional words to include the current reality e.g. the poor to include the poor planet, and virtues to include political and social love.

Prophetic Energising

This is of course hugely challenging. It's a two edged sword. Many prefer the known past to the as yet unseen future. Stepping out into the prophetic imagination can provoke fear, it inevitably involves a certain darkness like that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Moses and Israel know no more about *Yahweh's* freedom than Egypt did and so they entrust themselves to it in fits and starts - one step forward two steps back. But in the end they know that the empire of Pharaoh cannot be trusted, even though it is known and as it were is in the light of day. The people led by prophetic imagination find a new energy in trust and in the encounter with the liberating *Yahweh*. Even if that encounter is sometimes in circumstances they cannot anticipate and that are, in that sense, dark and initially unclear. All too often like our prayer.

The God who takes sides

Another aspect of the prophetic imagination that Moses shares is the extraordinary realisation that God has taken sides, has judged. His prophet Moses passionately lives this out. He was an adopted member of the imperial court elite. But he takes sides. He makes a judgement, in the name of *Yahweh*, with the losers, the powerless the marginal! Eventually this will be translated by the people as "*God is for us!*" God's free choice of them. This is not how organised religion had been experienced where the god's maintained the status quo. Sadly Israel, and later the Church, will forget this radical freedom of God. Will assume that their structures - the temple, the Vatican, the Pope, the Episcopacy, the feudal system, Christendom are sustained by God and reflect God's Kingdom. This is a very dangerous presumption with a perverted theology to sustain it. In the end it is idolatrous- it worships a static fixed god. And if our



seeing, our imagination is false, our judgements and actions will inevitably be false.

Praise and song, poems and dance. The power of doxology.

Eventually the people regain something of the sense of the awesome freedom of their free God. They turned this into song. Prophetic imagination always needs song and poetry, and art, to find appropriate expression. So we have the liberated and liberating song of the Sea in Ex 15:1-18 and the Song of Miriam Ex. 15:21 which focus' on the freedom of God to act and where the people's freedom is derived from God's. The use of Yahweh, the name of the strange free God, occurs again and again in their songs/psalms as they play with its possible meaning and implications.

In praise and song they name the divine name, *Yahweh*, that redefines their lives. The name that celebrates an unforeseen turn in history. They celebrate in dance, free bodies no longer under the control of Pharaoh. Miriam picks up a tambourine and the women follow her in dance celebrating the freedom the free God has created for them. How easily that freedom of the body has been curtailed both in Judaism and Christianity over the centuries, with control of the body being so often part of the oppression of religion.

You might say well these are only songs. What difference does a song make to the real world? But the shift in judgement to a new imagined reality depends in part on the words we find to express it. The culture wars we have witnessed recently in the Church, "*I am for Benedict!*" "*We are for Francis!*" are all too often based on particular forms of rhetoric, language legitimising change or managing reality, structuring and scheduling and ensuring there is no change. But doxology, the language of praise, prayer, and worship is always potentially dangerous, it breaks out of control. It is language which makes possible compassion and justice, transforming fear into energy.

A Psalm as Subversive Protest?

I'd like to reflect on one of the psalms which on the surface seems to celebrate the wisdom of Solomon. A psalm sung by pilgrims on the way to the Holy Temple built by Solomon on Mt Zion in Jerusalem. I have only realised recently that the psalm is a stunning example of the judgement of prophetic imagination in a remarkably subversive form.

A little background. During the forty or so years' reign of King Solomon, an enormous social experiment took place which changed Israel, the chosen people



of God, and marked its future. Solomon continued David's consolidation of the federation of the 12 tribes but in doing so took as his model, not a confederation of equals but the powerful Kingdoms and Empires of the surrounding regions. The much vaunted "wisdom of Solomon" is, in great part, a celebration of the ideas and practices that he borrowed to enable his new centralised kingdom, with its court and Temple in Jerusalem, David's City, to come about and survive. To this end new social structures were imposed. The People of God's covenant with Moses, had been pledged to create a land where the widow, the stranger, the orphan, and all the powerless, were at the centre of concern. There no-one should be oppressed by another, and no-one end up in slavery without the promise of liberation. All this in remembrance of their origins in Egypt as slave labourers of an oppressive regime. *Yahweh*, the self-revealed God of freedom, had liberated them from this, and established them as a nation that would model such freedom for the future, to be a sign of hope to other oppressed peoples. This is beautifully expressed in the idealised verse 1Kings 4:25 " *And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.* " Note the emphasis on dwelling at peace with the land, God's gift, as central to this vision.

After King David the leader of the army was the highest person in Israel because they and the army both protected and sustained the nation's freedom. However under Solomon the leading figure becomes the Chief Priest followed by three court Officials, one over the 12 prefects (1Kings 4:7-19) , a kings friend, and one who governs the palace. The centre has shifted from the army of liberation to the Temple, the Palace and structures of central administration and control. From a rural economy based on a careful and kindly use of land there is a shift to cities and urban centres which draw in the lands produce for trade and sale. The prefects and their districts do include some of the original tribal districts of Israel especially on the peripheries, e.g. Ephraim and Manasseh. However another five are named after towns reorganising the central hill country and the former Canaanite territories annexed to Israel and Judah under David.

The purpose of this re-organisation becomes clearer when we read that each regional prefect had to provide food for the King and the court for one month of the year (1Kings 4:7; 5:7). The reform of the 12 districts enables a new more efficient centralised system of taxation, neutralising the influence of the house and family of the patriarch Joseph over the tribes, and privileging Judah which alone remained tax-free. Indeed the King distributes salaries from the provisions and taxes to his royal servants. They are now dependent on him and form a new core hierarchy of professional soldiers, court and palace staff, administrators,



merchants, and artisans. The Levites (1Chronicles 6:39-66; 26: 30-32. Joshua 21:1-42; 1Chronicles 6: 39-66) are integrated into this new administration with the role , among others, of administering the new fortified cities, garrison and store towns (1Kings 9:15, 17-19: 10:26).

One aspect of Solomon's wisdom was to increase the use of foreign experts, mercenaries (2 Samuel 15:18) , officials (I Kings 4:6) and artisans like Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 7:13). He made a number of political marriages with the daughters of neighbouring Kings, including ironically, the daughter of the then Pharaoh, effectively locating himself and his dynasty within the same social framework from which Moses had first liberated the tribes.

As a result there was a growth in syncretism and the toleration of the cults of foreign gods in Jerusalem (I Kings 11:4-5, 7-8). This eventually led to a reaction from the Northern Tribes against the centralised taxation and governance. They lamented the watering down of the unique covenant with *Yahweh* the liberator and with the land, and protested at the re-interpretation of *Yahweh's* favour as primarily on the house of David, the holy City of Zion and its centralised and priest-led organisation of religion in the Temple. They saw at its heart the development and reinforcement of a new militarist defence system which even Pharaoh had to negotiate with.

Jerusalem's wealth expanded through its collection of tolls on international caravans. It became a regional centre of trade and diplomacy. Its international multicultural court was a centre for the collection and exchange of information and technology. This further reinforced Solomon's reputation for wisdom. But the seeds of discontent were well planted before Solomon's death. His extensive use of forced labour from the Northern Tribes alongside foreign slaves directly contravened the story of the origin of the liberated People of God. This would lead to a revolt and the breakdown of the Kingdom, with the Northern Tribes declaring independence. Visibly weakened the land would become easy pickings for the Assyrians and Babylonians and lead to the exile and the destruction of the original 12 tribes.

There is a terrible reversal back to a society which effectively depends on an elite privileged leadership being sustained and served by a series of increasingly oppressed underclasses with whom they are no longer in touch. Such servitude and subservience was meant to have disappeared from the new people of God, as it grew in understanding of the nature of the immensity of what had taken place in the call of Moses and the experience of Exodus. In the new land an



egalitarian society was called into being with freed slaves and manual workers as its citizens and a gospel for the poor, the frail, the formerly excluded, the stateless - the widow, the stranger, and the orphan.

Yet after the exile the returners in trying to re-construct the tradition will place the memory of David and Solomon on a pedestal as an ideal. Christianity will take over the image of a divinely appointed anointed King as an image of the risen Jesus, Lord of all, with awful consequences in the history of Christendom and of Christian Kings and Emperors. Even down to our own time with the Russian Patriarch blessing and encouraging the Army of oppression in Ukraine and supporting President' Putin's plan's for a return to a Soviet Union. But at the heart of the tradition of biblical song there is a psalm which will keep alive the prophetic judgement on Solomon and indeed of all kings who would forget the vision of Moses free nation.

Psalm 72 celebrates lyrically the well-being of central government and portrays the faithful king as part of the lifeblood of creation, under him Israel is successful in war and trade and prosperity for all. But embedded within the psalm are the requirements of the covenant with God. The king must:

*Deliver the needy when they call,
The poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
And saves the life of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
And precious is their blood in his sight. (v12-14)*

Here and elsewhere (v.1-4) the expectation is clearly that the King will act in solidarity with the needy and oppressed and maintain even-handed justice for all. Implicit in the psalm with its reference to the Queen of Sheba is the decline that happened under Solomon and the kings after him which the prophet Ezekiel will parody in 34:2-6

"Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! You eat the fat, clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings: but you do not feed the sheep."

So what we have in Psalm 72 is a subversive protest song praising God for the covenant vision of what the land is called to be and reminding the pilgrims of the vision of a people with the most frail and needy at the centre of society



sustained and protected by the strong. Yet laying out the role of its King which has rarely been fulfilled.

Jesus will pick up these themes in his own preaching about sheep without shepherds and the crowds and the authorities would have known exactly what he was saying. As this song was sung every year by pilgrims on pilgrimage to the Holy City at Passover it is hardly surprising that the authorities were nervous and needed the help of their Roman allies forces to keep the peace in Jerusalem.

The beginning of the Gospel in the Prophetic Imagination of two Women

Those who pray the office of evening prayer, celebrate this vision every day.



There Mary meets Elizabeth and the spirit of Moses' sister Miriam flames forth again. The child dances in Elizabeth's womb, like David before the Ark of the Covenant coming to Jerusalem. The male, patriarchal voice, in this case that of Zechariah, Elizabeth's

Priest husband, is silent. **Until** he bends to the Angels message, to the free will of the free God, and names his son John, the only voices heard in this household are of two liberated women. They, with extraordinary intensity, express the prophetic imagination of their people and anticipate its renewal as God comes close again in sovereign freedom. But it is a judgement on the now. The coming God comes not to the Temple, or the court, or the holy places, or among the priesthood but amidst the *mikroi*, the poor, powerless and oppressed. God's Spirit in Mary and Elizabeth is working towards a new unforeseen community of freedom. In Jesus life the symbol of this will be his liberating stories and acts, above all his meals. Their song remains one of the greatest pieces of prophetic judgement in the scriptures. It remains a challenge to us still.



Further reading:

Brueggemann, W. (2001) *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press
.....(2014) *Reality, Grief and Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*.
Cambridge: Erdmanns

Gonzalez A. (2013) *A Study Guide on the Reign of God*. Miami :Convivium Press

Pagola J.A. (2012) *The Way opened up by Jesus: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mathew*. Miami: Convivium Press

Sobrinho, J. (2008) *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*. NY: Orbis Books

Sobrinho, J. (2018) *Jon Sobrinho: Spiritual Writings*. NY: Orbis Books



This is one of an occasional series of publications from the Commission, following events that we have facilitated or organised. Sign up on our website to receive regular updates about our work in the Leeds Diocese and how you can become involved.



Diocese of Leeds:
Justice & Peace Commission
For the Common Good in our Common Home



What is the Commission for?

- We exist to work alongside people in the Leeds Diocese as we try to grapple with what it means to live out our Christian vocation today.
- We celebrate all the people in the Diocese of Leeds who get involved in all sorts of ways – from campaigning about Climate Change to working with asylum seekers, from helping with food banks to writing letters to prisoners of conscience,. from campaigning for the abolition of nuclear weapons to raising awareness about Israel Palestine today.... – it could be a long list!

Above all our role is to not just to encourage **reflection** about these issues but also to encourage **action**.

What does the Commission do?

- We organise conferences, workshops and Days of Reflection to help raise awareness and to help people think about what the 'Just' Gospel response might be to specific situations of social injustice. Poverty and Climate change have been high on our agenda. Many of the issues are complex – but that does not mean we can ignore them.
- We partner with other organisations to bring events and people to Yorkshire to help us reflect on key issues. For example, we have worked with Pax Christi in the Leeds Diocese and the Romero Trust on several occasions. We have also regularly sponsored a film in the annual Leeds Palestinian Film Festival.
- We publish pamphlets like this one!

Find out more by signing up to receive regular monthly updates from the Commission. Fill in the form on our website:

www.leedsjp.org.uk