



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



Seeing with Prophetic Imagination - On the need for a new image of God.

The first of 3 Talks given by David McLoughlin

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
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In times of complexity, confusion, false news, collusion, manipulation and oppression we need those in our midst who see clearly, who still believe it is possible to touch what is real and true, and who can share this vision of hope in the midst of the surrounding fog.

As with Isaiah in his time so in every age we need men and women who open up for us the prophetic imagination of a Moses at the burning bush, or Hosea and Amos in a time of national crisis, or of Jesus in his time. Always the prophet speaks out in times of lament, of crisis, or forgetfulness when the original vision has grown dim and is now accommodated, packaged into parcels and soundbites. Then access to the divine message has become re-interpreted, controlled by elites, spiritual, political or academic.

Renewing the Vision

The prophet is rarely obvious from their early life. Moses was an adopted member of the elite oppressive ruling class, Isaiah is a court prophet without a king, an exile in Babylon along with Ezekiel. But they are called to see anew, to keep the prophetic imagination of exodus and covenant alive. To remember and re-encounter again the strange God, (***Yahweh***) ***I am who I am, I will be who I will be, I will be where I will be***, who from the beginning escapes definition and description, confinement or manipulation. Who is always with us but ahead of us.

With the decline of Babylon and the emergence of Persia and its shrewdly tactical, inclusive, ruler Cyrus, Isaiah raises again the hope of a renewed exodus and a return to the land, to live out anew, in full, the call to a free covenant with this strange free God. The years in exile have allowed Isaiah and others to gather the traditions and memories of the people, to re-imagine what that Promised Land was meant to be. They gather these memories into the texts we call the Pentateuch or the Hebrew bible. The time of brutal exile and loss had stripped away inessentials. There is the possibility of a return with renewed vision and a renewed purpose. In the imagination of the prophet the word God/Yahweh has become dangerous and disturbing again.

But by the time Jesus started his ministry he faced a land where the rule of Rome underpinned and undermined the outwardly Hebraic traditions. The Temple was compromised and the aristocracy colluded with imperial authorities. The only radical reform movements were so pure that the people of the soil, the mass of peasant workers, could not follow their laws and



dictates. All 300 plus priestly rules adopted by the radical Pharisees. There was a lot of law, orthodoxy, right thinking, but the prophetic imagination had been lost.

Seeing anew

Jesus very first public teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth renewed that prophetic imagination in his time. Although Luke has this already heralded by the marginal figures of his expectant mother and her old cousin Elizabeth when their two voices rise in a harmony of the prophetic imagination of their people. ***“My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices...he puts down he mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly. The hungry he fills with good things, the rich he sends empty away...”*** Mary's *Magnificat*, renews the prophetic vision of her people which her son's life and teaching will flesh out.

Getting God Wrong

Ideas about God nearly always involve exclusion. An all too human mechanism born of fear of the strange and other. We see in the gospels how the different groups Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees all want to define God and religion in particular ways. Always others get excluded from the circle of salvation. In one encounter, in an absurd argument over whose wife a much married widow will be at the resurrection (Mth22:23-33), Jesus just says they've got it all wrong. They don't see. They know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. He cites Ex3:6 *"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob"*. The long dead patriarchs are all alive **in God**. God's life cannot be reduced to any of our conceptual systems. Jesus suggests the life of the living God is a total radical life that cannot be meaningfully contrasted with death. They have got God wrong and so have life wrong. Jesus renews the awesome indefinable nature of Yahweh, *I am who I will be*, which underpins all prophecy from Moses onwards.

Paul appreciates this and addresses it in Rom 1:21f. He says : *We have all got God wrong exchanging the truth about God with a lie*. The Gospel is an ongoing prophetic critique of such false seeing, enabling and provoking us to arrive at the uncomfortable place where the living God is. That is, anywhere and everywhere and always open to the stranger, the destitute, the abandoned widows and orphans!

Conversion to life

The remedy to our loss of sight is an active shared remembering of the Gospel, provoking us to turn our minds around - ***metanoieite/*** to convert. Ultimately to



contemplate Christ and see our true model and image. The one we are called to be icons of. Then there is a challenge to behave accordingly, but the order is important, our minds have to be changed first, broken open by the prophetic imagination. We have to see.

It is this trust, that the free God is a God of life, that enables Jesus to move towards his death without being manipulated by death (Heb 12:2). Death, as philosophers from Socrates to Hegel had believed, is no longer the defining moment of our personal life. The disciples did not understand this till after the resurrection. Jesus had taught that God is light not dark, life not death, love not hate, but the disciples had missed the point. (Cf. Mth 13:24-30; 47f). The God of prophetic imagination is removed from, breaks out of, the neat confines of our narrow moralities; our judging and condemning (Lk 13:1-5).

Paul understood this through his unexpected and strange encounter on the Damascus Road. It begins his turning from a zealot's service of the law, religion turned in on itself, involving righteous violence in pursuit and persecution of heretics (something which the church enthusiastically returned to at the Reformation and the Inquisition). His encounter with the risen Christ reveals there is no violence in God who continues to offer his persecutors mercy "*Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?*" The rest of Paul's life and ministry is the working out of the moment of prophetic insight that God in Christ is now one with the marginal ones and there is no graced life without them. God is accessible in unholy as in holy places.

The revealing of the faithful loving kindness of God

In reversal of the story of Abraham (Gen 22) ABBA offers a sacrifice to humans. (cf Jn 3:16). Jesus offering of himself unmasks and negates the world's violence. (cf 1Jn. 1:5). In the process the concept of the wrath of God is gradually being undermined. The process which Paul and the disciples went through can not be short circuited. The content of God as mercy, as *hesed we'emet*/ faithful loving kindness/radical solidarity with all of creation, is not easy to receive. It has nothing to do with our models of justice and goodness that all too often expel and separate and marginalise.

If we can learn to stand in the tension between the Gospel vision and our own understanding then our sense of God changes.



Jesus resurrection cracks open even further this inadequate image of God – revealing how all are locked into systems of violence even God’s people Israel. The resurrection reveals God’s life as total life and our life as finding its end and purpose in that life, rather than somehow being stuck between redemption and heaven.

The resurrection challenges us to go beyond the exclusion and the violence that diminishes life in others. It invites us to discover models of living in which men and women freed from the fear of death can create an order based on graciousness and reconciled life rather than violence and enforcement.

Abba as new.

The followers of Jesus were aware he was doing something new. He was bringing about a new state of affairs - what he called the Kingdom of God. This pointed to a different understanding of God - “*Abba*” - a word from the ordinary messy world of everyday life. **It implied a new way of divine-human relating.** It was experienced through meals and healings, through unforeseen encounters with often excluded people with little dignity and few rights. But it was only after the death and resurrection that the disciples began to appreciate just how different this understanding of life was. The risen Christ was strange, He had already broken out of their categories and their limits.

They explored this new meaning together in shared meals, remembering Jesus life, and actions and teaching, alongside their own experience. They developed symbolic rituals to celebrate, and keep it fresh and alive; this new relationship they now had with God and the new meaning they had found in the midst of their daily lives.

The shared meals became the Eucharist, literally, the thanksgiving.

The first of these rituals for newcomers was baptism and it became a powerful set of symbolic ritual actions, a re-birthing, a re-creation, initiating new believers into a whole new way of seeing the world, themselves and others. Their white tunics proclaimed this newness this dignity of the twice-born, the members of this strange priestly, royal, prophetic people, called to make a difference.

For us the Universe is a sacramental universe, because Creation is not the once and for all big bang but the **on-going act** of a faithful loving Creator. Heidegger’s Question: “*Why is there something rather than nothing?*” is answered in the Jewish Christian tradition by “*Because God loves it.*” This is the difference



between Sartre's hero Antoine Roquentin in *Nausea* with Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures* – both experience and see the radical particularity of things but in two totally and utterly different frameworks. Meaninglessness, where we have the burden of giving life meaning (Sartre), versus loving ongoing creative relating which we are invited to participate in (Francis).

Seeing reality through the optic of Grace.

It is in creating that God gives God-self to the Universe in creative love. This is what we call Grace – God's gift of God-self. Aquinas has written a length on this (*ST. 1 q.45*), how all that exists exists because God loves it into being and holds it in being and this, for Aquinas, is the basis of our hope. Julian of Norwich has the same message .but it is perhaps more accessible in her image of the hazelnut (the cosmos) in the hand of God.

In this perspective anything can be a sacrament – not perhaps as fully as the seven great ritual sacraments of the church - but your child, your pet, a beautiful sunset, a wonderful song can all make you realise this is a good universe; realise that as the twice born we have a dignity that points to the essential dignity of all God's creatures and lives that can make that ever more real. This is what Augustine meant when he said: "*Sacraments effect what they signify.*" They bring us to recognise the presence of Grace, of the divine love and creativity already here among us, in bread and wine, water and oil, hands and bodies, already out there among an unsuspecting world. They sustain the prophetic imagination.

Look at the poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins "*Hurrahing the Harvest*". The melancholy Gerard plods home from his work teaching and notices the changing of the year. But suddenly before getting home something shifts, an insight emerges and he sees it as all part of God's beautiful and purposeful creation and says "*These things, these things were here and but the beholder wanting.*" The world was there, already beautiful but the poet **had to be changed** to become able to see. This is what the prophetic imagination and the sacramental way offers us throughout our lives, the provocation to change so as to truly see. To see with prophetic imagination to see within the revelation of God's self-revealing.

This is what we call grace, the opening up to the love of God holding all things in being. Nothing is simply secular all is en-graced. It just needs noticing. Part of our vocation as a sacramental people with a prophetic imagination is to



reverence and notice, to see our world as en-graced. The particular sacraments help us to look out on the world and the things of the world, bread and water and wine, and bodies, and oil and perfume, to notice and see. And then in our lives, our words and acts, to enable and provoke this seeing. Bernard Lonergan in his great work *Insight* suggest the stages that go towards this conversion of mind and heart. They are a series of what he calls transcendental imperatives:

- be attentive
- be intelligent (SEE)
- be reasonable
- be responsible (JUDGE)
- and if necessary change
- He later replaced the final with simply - love. (ACT)

How might we encourage our communities, our circles and groups, our work-mates, colleagues and friends, to enter personally and collectively into such a process? Where would we start?

Michael Himes summarises this: *“What is always and everywhere true must be noticed, and accepted, and celebrated, somewhere, sometime.”* In our lives, our engagements, our work, and in our sacramental celebration that is what we do. At a particular time, in a particular place with particular people, we together accept and celebrate the reality that God was, is, and will be our free creator. That God’s love was, and is, revealed in God’s Word, now made flesh and sacramental for us, present in this beautiful world powerfully in the Spirit who sustains all life from eternity to eternity.

Year by year our celebration of the sacraments, our openness to present encounter with God in the everyday, in the other before us, can help us to enter into this wonderful reality. But our sacramental formation is lifelong. Baptism and Confirmation and Marriage and Ministry are always just the beginning, becoming ever more real as they are lived out creatively, imaginatively day by day in open minds and hearts. Provoking us to see and celebrate and enhance the dignity of all those around us. Thomas Cavanaugh, writing about the torture of so many innocents under the Pinochet regime in Chile (*Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ*. Oxford: Blackwell 1998), and its destruction of community, shows how gradually the celebration of the eucharist with its capacity to imagine alternatives became the turning point in the resistance to torture since *“to participate in the Eucharist is to live in inside God’s imagination. It is to be caught up into what is really real, the body of Christ.”*



(p.279) As this took place, as men and women put on the mind and imagination of Christ they increasingly resisted the state's definition of reality through torture. The regime's control, like the control of Pharaoh and Egypt over the Hebrew slaves, was being reversed. Perhaps for us the transformative influence of the eucharist is more likely to focus on our use and abuse of the things of the earth. "*Fruits of the earth and work of human hands*". And seeing differently to decide to engage and organise and act to make a difference. May it be so!

Further reading:

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Chryssavgis, J. (2019) *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality*. London: T&T Clark

Duffy, R & Gambatese, A. (1999) *Made in God's Image: The Catholic Vision of Human Dignity*. NY: Paulist Press

www.bc.edu/Church21 Prof Michael Himes, *On the Sacramental Principle*

<https://www.religion-online.org> John Habgood (1990) "A Sacramental Approach to Environmental Issues" in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology*. NY: Orbis Books



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