



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 16th February 2025

Readings: *Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26*

Epiphany VI

Some of us come to church to escape from the world because it's unbearable, some of us come to be strengthened for being in the world because it's inescapable, and others because we need both.

Perhaps that's especially so if our own circumstances are hard enough, without the challenges of today's worldwide tension, that one senior official describes as "the most dangerous and contested time I have ever known in my career".¹ Transporting us to Ukraine, Andrii illustrates that, with his eloquent call for freedom and leadership, for integrity and hope, for his own nation, and by implication for so many others.

So, what have we to say as the Church in the face of it all? In truth, it is tragic that things like secularism and safeguarding are *deadening the voice* of faith communities, when there is so much that the Abrahamic faiths have to offer: truth and virtue, grace and shalom, challenge, choice, freedom, all crowned with the love of God. But today that is frequently disdained or simply ignored. Abi Millar, a thirty-something journalist, who characterises her own religiousness as '*comfortable with a certain level of imprecision*',² sums up Western spirituality in a way that I can recognise in twenty-first century Britain, where so much that was taken for granted is now eschewed. She says this:

*In the absence of ancestral wisdom, time-honoured rituals, or even an agreed definition of the word 'spirituality', secular Westerners are almost having to start from scratch, meeting ourselves where we are with a necessary measure of humility.'*³

When The Church's profile is declining and our respectability has so much doubt cast upon it, it's even worse that *our confidence is also diminishing*, diluting our sense of who we are meant to be as The Church taking our place in the world. I'm grateful to Walter Brueggemann, who will not give in to this, and pithily sums up The Church's purpose in these words:

*The formation of religious community, the practice of disciplined spirituality, and the embrace of prophetic faith are dimensions of Christian obedience that converge and cannot be separated from each other.*⁴

Religious community, disciplined spirituality, and prophetic faith. Looking at today's world - today's questioning and unstable, anxious and agnostic world - there seems to be more than ample scope for The Church to fill in the gaping holes in our hope by offering community, spirituality, and faith. I do not have time to explore all three of those, but let me reflect upon the third: what it means for us as the Church to embrace 'prophetic faith'. How will that shape our life and work as Downing Place Church? And do today's Bible readings have anything to say to us?

Well, let's note the context into which Jeremiah was speaking half a millennia before Jesus. It might feel familiar to us. Essentially, Judah's leaders are hatching a strategy for forming an alliance with Egypt against the Babylonians. Result? The Babylonians tighten their grip, until Jerusalem falls, the Temple is destroyed, and the people are whisked off into exile. So, 'twas ever thus'. That's what people do when tension is high and trust is rock bottom. You don't need me to point out some contemporary parallels for strategic alliances, tightened grips, destroyed cities, and one people capturing another., freedom lost. Though, in truth, the media are rather better at highlighting some of those situations around the world more than others. We hear about Ukraine, Israel and Palestine far more than Haiti, Myanmar, Sudan, or, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

¹ Gardner Frank, 2025 *Leaders set for key security meeting as 'old' world order at risk of crumbling* on the BBC News website. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjex5w1z02do> Accessed 14th February 2025

² Millar, Abi 2025 *The Spirituality Gap: searching for meaning in a secular age* Richmond, Surrey: September Publishing page 2

³ *ibid* page 241

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter 2006 *Like fire in the bones: listening for the prophetic word in Jeremiah* Minneapolis: Augsburg Press page 142

So, in this world, which today is uncomfortably as it was for the Judeans twenty-five centuries ago, here are four clues from today's readings about how we might live out prophetic faith.

First, being a prophetic voice is not to be a partisan political voice. Indeed, diverse, rival political parties echo in their philosophies many a Hebrew and Christian principle. To be a prophetic voice is to speak neither more nor less than what we discern under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would speak. Brueggemann puts it like this:

*Prophetic faith is a voice for life in a world that is bent on death.*⁵

If only there was not so much in the world that seems bent on death. Into that death-dealing world we are bidden to speak words, and inhabit ways, that are life-giving.

Secondly, in Jesus's *Sermon on the Plain* – perhaps preached on those flat shorelands beside the Sea of Galilee - he speaks of four blessings and four woes. Jesus's quartet of contrasts encourages *us* to live in contrast to our social norms. So, speaking lyrically rather than literally, Jesus suggests that

- being poor and hungry are more likely to be a blessing than is being rich or full in the sense that a full purse and a full stomach are momentary, passing delusions of self-sufficiency, whereas being in want by definition alerts us to our need of others and of God, of community;
- weeping in genuine lament is a surer way to emerge from our tragedies than is the laughter which sneers at those tragedies without addressing them;
- and being hated for what we are is a surer way to reality and wellbeing than is being loved for what we are not.

Here are counter cultural ways, not to *earn* a place within the reign and love of God, but to 'embrace a prophetic faith' that reveals how we live within the reign of God already. A priceless freedom that brings us 'home'.

Thirdly, Jeremiah proclaims that the way to prophetic faith is to trust in the Lord. Taking up that theme, Jesus seems to be saying that it's trusting the Lord which makes poverty richer than wealth, hunger more satisfying than gluttony, weeping more healing than laughter; uncomfortable authenticity more credible than wearing a self-deceiving façade. Now, it's not that trusting the Lord ensures nothing ever goes wrong, and that we are exempt from life's challenges if only we will trust the Lord. Rather, trusting the Lord enables us to rise above despair and cynicism, because it keeps us connected to God in a way that scepticism and turning away from God can never do. Of course we turn our backs on God – that is human; arguably it's spiritual, too, because it is a candid reaction to what we find unbearable. But the difference between the person who is not able to believe and the one who is, is that that that person of religious faith, having turned away from God, wants to turn back again, and looks for how to do so.

And **finally**, the person of religious sensibilities and commitments is equipped for prophetic faith by prayer. St Luke is sparing in his references to Jesus praying, but on two of the more noteworthy occasions his prayer is the spur to some significant shift, change of gear, heightening the dynamic in the story – 'prayer typically signals a new stage in the salvation story', as James R Edwards has it.⁶ So, in Luke 6, Jesus prays, and a rabble of disciples is enlisted; in Luke 9, he prays again, and the Transfiguration occurs, as Peter, James and John are given an unprecedented exposure to the glory of the God they meet in Jesus. Prayer changes things. It doesn't always put them right, but it significantly shifts what's going on in the story, especially because prayer is that turning back to God which is what it means to trust the Lord.

Four paths to prophetic faith: words of life, contrast to the social norms, trusting in the Lord, and prayer. May they equip us as Downing Place Church and wherever else we live out our faith to be 'a voice for life in a world that is bent on death.' And thus may God be glorified and God's people made whole. Amen

N. P. Uden,
16th February 2025

⁵ *ibid* 142

⁶ Edwards, James, R 2015 *The Gospel according to Luke: the Pillar New Testament commentary* Nottingham: Apollos page 184