

## *Hearing the prophet*

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

Brian McKinlay

Second Sunday of Advent — 8 December 2013

*Isaiah 11.1-10, Psalm 72.1-7, 18-21, Romans 15.4-13, Matthew 3.1-13*

On August 28th this year the people of the United States celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 civil rights march on Washington, when Dr Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a huge gathering.

“I have a dream today,” he said.

... I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed ... that all men are created equal. ...

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

“Let freedom ring,” he said.

That is the voice of the prophet.

The world is saddened by the death of Nelson Mandela. He said of himself, “I stand before you, not as a prophet, but as a humble servant.” Yet, he spoke with a prophet's voice and brought forgiveness and reconciliation to his nation.

In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a future King, descended from Jesse, the father of King David.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

This is not a divine king, but a man would rule wisely under God's guidance.

Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela each spoke to the political and social circumstances of their day, yet they also spoke for all time.

The prophecies we read from Isaiah were spoken to the political and social circumstances of ancient Israel. Yet today, Jews and Gentiles alike read this text as a prophecy of the Lord's Messiah. From earliest time, we Christians have understood it to be about Jesus, the one who is Immanuel, God with us.

In today's Gospel, Matthew takes a different part of Isaiah, chapter 40, and applies it directly to John the Baptist's proclamation of Jesus' coming. “This is the one” John said, “of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke ... ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Our reading from Romans similarly takes the text of Isaiah and applies it to the coming of Christ.

People across the centuries have looked back at the ancient prophecies found words that spoke to them. They looked at their circumstances and say “Ah, that's what the prophet was talking about ... this is what the prophet meant.” We do the same.

Many of the words spoken to Judah and Israel are also fulfilled in Jesus himself, his kingdom and in us, the church. Much of the text of Handel's *Messiah*, which was sung here last night, is taken from the Old Testament yet speaks of the Christ.

Matthew, the central gospel for this church year, has many references to the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. It speaks of event that happened to fulfil the words of the prophet

As it has with the Hebrew prophecies, the church has looked back at some of Jesus' words and understood them in the light of history and experience. For example, Jesus' disciples didn't know what he meant when he said that 'this temple' would be destroyed and then raised up again in three days. But later, after the resurrection, they understood that he was speaking of his own body.

Linda spoke about the present-day ministry of the prophet some time back, when talking about the role of the deacon. Prophetic ministry does two things.

First, prophets expose their present situation. They condemn injustice and godlessness. They expose false claims to power and authority. It's the prophet's unenviable task to bring the people and their rulers to repentance, to have them grieve for the terribleness of their situation.

But this alone would lead to despair. Prophetic ministry has a second task: it brings energy, energy that comes from hope. As in today's Collect, "... we hear his voice of judgement, that we may also rejoice in his day of promise." Godly prophecy creates a new vision where oppression and injustice need not continue forever. Most especially, the prophet praises and thanks God as the source of freedom. God is one who strengthens the weary and gives life to the people of the kingdom.

John the Baptist's message had these two aspects. First he condemned the corrupt religious leadership of his day—"You brood of vipers!"—and called the nation to repent. Then John spoke exciting news of hope: "One greater than I is coming after me ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Jesus criticised the power structures and injustices of his day and spoke of new life and hope in God. His death speaks for all time of the horror of violence and injustice and his resurrection shows the power, joy and freedom of God's new life.

Martin Luther King was following Jesus when he said in great 1963 speech:

When we allow freedom to ring ... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children ... will be able to join hands and sing ... "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Nelson Mandela also spoke from a heart of faith. At a church Easter conference in 1994, he said.

We raise our voices in holy gladness to celebrate the victory of the risen Christ over the terrible forces of death. Easter is a joyful festival! ... a festival of human solidarity, because it celebrates the fulfilment of the Good News! The Good News borne by our risen Messiah who chose not one race ... country ... language [or] tribe [but] who chose all of humankind!

While travelling in America recently, James and I visited the popular Yerba Buena Gardens in downtown San Francisco. There's a Martin Luther King Jr memorial set beautifully in the Gardens. Perhaps San Franciscans who go there—and it's a popular location—will recall how things have changed in the fifty years and think with gratitude, "Now we experience what he spoke about." They look back and bring to mind Dr King's words, the prophet's words.

Prophecy disrupts the business-as-usual approach to politics and community life. Prophecy happens between life as it is and life as it might be and ought to be. Prophetic thinking, speaking and writing concerns is not just for the grand scale, but for our common life together.

Like the prophets of old, at Advent, we reflect on the present and allow God to work in us as we imagine a different future—a future empowered and given wisdom by the coming of the Messiah. That doesn't mean all of the past is thrown away; it may, in fact, mean that we strengthen and renew parts of our inheritance that have been neglected.

We apply spiritual *imagination* to our world—God-given imagination. In a famous book title, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls it *The Prophetic Imagination*.

In every congregation of God's church there's a place for the prophetic imagination that recognises where the present situation isn't right or good enough and where things will be better if we act—as Robert Kennedy, another renowned political orator, said:

There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask, "Why?" I dream of things that never were, and ask, "Why not?"

Pandora's, the Northbourne Centre, the Lamerton Centre, our family and children's ministry, *Food@St Philip's*, the Twilight Fair, the presence of a Dinka congregation at St Philip's, our worship in music—each of these and more exist because someone saw that ministry, care, fellowship or worship wasn't happening as quite as well as it might and talked about a way ahead.

And now, today, we can reflect back and think, "*That's* what they were on about."

Public worship and prayer happens in this space five days a week at least, because Rebecca, like Rob before her, has continued to call our parish family to prayer.

I suspect that a call to prayer and reflection on the Scriptures—a prophetic call if you will—is part of God's Advent message to us at St Philip's for the coming year. There are other things we can consider too—few of which require money, you'll be relieved to know.

Remember when Peter quoted the prophet, Joel, in his Pentecost sermon at the beginnings of the church:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old people shall dream dreams, and your young people shall see visions.

This Advent, in God's presence,

—let's imagine, let's dream, of new things,

—let's gently encourage each other with them,

—and let's act on what the Spirit is saying to us.