

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – September 30, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11:00am Sunday Masses – 1,075 words

“Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!” The theme of prophecy in the first reading is a challenging one, not only in terms of our understanding, but also as regards our mission. We need to have a proper understanding of what prophecy is; but we also need to carry out the prophetic role that is ours, and sometimes we fail to do so. Moreover, we see how some people today think of themselves as prophets – usually those who “speak truth to power”; but the question arises for us: How can we know if they – we – are really being prophetic or not?

The common understanding of prophecy is usually that it is an utterance having to do with the future. A prophet thus is a divinely-sent fortuneteller, according to this conception. But when we study the prophets in the scriptures, we see that they often speak about current matters and even interpret the past. In the end, what they speak is the word of God. Therefore, many of their utterances are prefaced with the formula, “Thus says the Lord”. A prophet speaks the word of God – and that could have reference to the past, the present, or the future.

The word of God spoken may have to do with a warning: “if you do such-and-such, then there will be a certain consequence”; we see many passages where the prophets foretell doom if the people do not repent or otherwise fulfill what God desires. The prophecy spoken could have to do with God’s revelation of himself; for example, it was the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ – the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity. And so on. The prophets spoke many things, and whatever they spoke was the word of God.

As we study prophecy in scripture, though, we see that there were also false prophets. Each summer in the breviary we read from the first book of Kings, in which King Ahab consulted his 400 prophets about going into battle. Now they had a lying spirit, and they told the king that he would surely win the battle. But he also consulted the prophet Micaiah, who told not only of the lying spirit but warned the king of defeat and death. Ahab ultimately heeded the 400 – and so he died. Only after the fact did we know for sure that they had been false prophets!

And that is also what we see in Deuteronomy: it says, “when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken...”. In other words, “by their fruits you will know them”; but this, perhaps, does not totally satisfy us. We want to be able to know up-front if a prophet is truly speaking the word of God – if what he or she says is true. After all, the word of God often deals with weighty matters – the things of life and death. How can we know?

Well, something else we see with the true prophets is that they hesitated to accept their mission. When the Lord called Moses, Moses responded with great resistance: “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh...?”; then, “But...they will not believe me...!”; then, “Oh my Lord, I am not eloquent...”; then finally – and this time he angered the Lord – he said, “Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person.” We see a similar trepidation with Jeremiah, who said to the Lord, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak...!”

In the New Testament, there is our patron, St. Paul, who saw himself as the “worst of sinners”, who did not speak eloquently, and who also persevered even though his message was perceived as utter folly. From Moses, Jeremiah, St. Paul, and others, we see that a true prophet is humble and approaches his task with trepidation; we see that he perseveres in speaking the truth – as St. Paul taught, “in season and out of season” – even when scorned by others. These are some of the signs of a true prophet.

A final consideration has to do with the nature of divine revelation. A prophet speaks God’s word, and that word is always true. But God also completed his public revelation in Christ. We expect no new truths from him. Therefore, a true prophet never speaks anything that

contradicts Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition; that is, he never contradicts magisterial Church teaching. How many there are in the world today, who fashion themselves as prophets, yet speak “new things” that go against what the Church has always taught! Stay far away from them!

And so we may apply this to ourselves. For we, by baptism, share in the prophetic office of Christ. That is what our faith teaches. We are called to speak God’s word in our world today. Do we approach the task with humility, even with trepidation? But do we also ultimately accept the call? Do we seek to inform ourselves, learning what the word of God says and the Church teaches, and how to apply it to our contemporary situation? Or do we just make it up sometimes? It’s a serious task, but the task is ours. It belongs to us all by baptism – not just to a select few.

In conclusion, I consider it quite clear that this is a time in the Church when true prophets are needed rather urgently. I encourage you to make your voice heard: with trepidation and humility, with reflection and prayer, asking God to guide, and not speaking rashly or out of anger; but, ultimately, speaking. Our bishops, our priests, – yes, our Holy Father! –, need to hear our voices as the Lord places it on our heart to speak the truth. It is the truth that sets us free, as Christ himself taught us.

Over the preceding months I have been asking myself what I must do. Thus I have proposed the disciplines of prayer and fasting, pursuing them myself. I have added the Saturday morning Mass, and encouraged you to come. We had the vigil of reparation, and many participated. What else can we do? How will we be prophets at this crucial time? I do not have complete answers. But the Lord will show us – if, with holy fear and humility, we turn to him, accept his call, and follow his lead.