



The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us...Walter Brueggemann

January 28th

Third Ordinary Sunday

Mark 1:21-28

Cursed be the false prophets!

A prophet's primary function in the Bible was to serve God and God alone, to be in such a relationship with God, and manifesting a life transforming humility, that he (sometimes she) could effectively serve as the divine representative or personal ambassador by communicating God's word to his people.

True prophets never spoke on their own authority or shared their personal opinions, but rather delivered the message God himself gave them. Several texts make this explicit. God promised Moses, *Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.*

When a believer walks according to the Spirit (Galatians 5:25), their **God-oriented** perspective is then demonstrated through characteristics that reflect the character, the person of Christ. When a believer walks in "the flesh," making choices that are determined by his or her sinful nature, this is demonstrated in undesirable, ungodly traits.

Paul lists these ungodly ways in **Galatians 5**... ⁹*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, shamelessness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, animosities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, discord, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Keep in mind, it is not that one person will have all of these, or even many of these. They highlight flaws that limit the possibilities of being able to minister as a prophet in God's Body the Church. They are as much personal checkpoints as they are characteristics of the faith community as a whole.

So, what kind of person, then, is a prophet of God? Again, we can turn to Paul for the kind of priorities that shape the life of the Christian prophet. The true prophet is one who lives in the Holy Spirit, no longer life for themselves (their own visions and priorities) but submit to being directed by the Spirit and *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and*

self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Unlike the characteristics of the false prophet, the genuine prophet, the one called by God and denying self takes up the cross of Christ and serves the Kingdom, is expected to manifest these characteristics in every aspect of the lives. Impossible!

However, for the prophet, it is by living in Christ, by shaping life under the Holy Spirit that God makes prophesy a reality. As Jesus said to his disciples... *With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*

False prophets are subtle and dangerous

From the time of Jesus, the Church has been undermined by those who claim to have what is best for the Church in mind but who bring about, thrive on and promote division and disunity. Of these we can declare that without repenting, they will **not** inherit the kingdom of God.

Jesus was very aware of this threat to the wellbeing and mission of the faithful and to faith communities. He warned in **Matthew 7:15**: *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.* And the word beware means all of us should be alert, but especially shepherds, to identify not just false teaching, but false teachers, whose ways are subtle. They're clothing themselves with lamb's wool while they're wolves.

The real challenge to the Church today does not come from outsiders, from unbelievers.

We are our own worst enemies as the New Testament so colourfully highlights. The word best used for these handmaidens of Satan is that of *charlatans*. What then is a “charlatan”?

A *charlatan* is a person pretending to be someone they are not. They might go through the motions of being a Christian but deep down they do this in the pursuit of self-interest in order to obtain money, power, fame, or other advantages through pretence or deception. They want to take control, shape the community according to their own desires, in ways that meet their own theological expectations and political ambitions. They are never content unless they have the final say, are given the acknowledgement they feel they deserve. In achieving this, the charlatan gathers around themselves people they can manipulate, often using them whilst remaining hidden in the background. These are the most dangerous of the false prophets because they use the Gospel but turn it inside out so that they do not appear to be working against God’s Kingdom.

Ezekiel said is well, writing of how false prophets *smear (their words and their ambitions) with whitewash*. They cover up sinfulness with lies and fake notions of peace, rather than promoting a cleansing of the heart and soul like a true prophet would. Their only way to expose their true ambitions is to see what they create around them: *You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.*

False prophets follow their own way

Jesus teaches how there is only **one Way** to the Father – His **Way**, a **Way** outlined in the great Sermon on the Mount. Anyone claiming to speak for the Church, wanting to pass judgment on the Church or presuming they know what is best for the Church and the way it carries out its mission in the world, must be examined in the light of that great Sermon.

The one validated as having God’s will at heart, who has been raised up by the Spirit to bring the Body of Christ together through the witness of their own lives (and not just by weight of words and skulduggery of their deeds) live the gospel

in ways that bring Christ to others. We can experience the faith foundation of the prophet’s ministry...

Love means we are willing to lay down our lives for friends rather than live for ourselves; **joy** means we have Christ’s happiness in us, especially at the conversion of sinners (Lk 15); **peace** means we have the tranquillity that Jesus gives and the world cannot give or take away. This will sometimes mean the sword of rejection even by family members who do not order their lives to Christ; **patience** means we bear with others’ faults and our own, never giving up on the Lord’s will to forgive and unite us. This is one of the most difficult but also the most powerful indication of a person’s proximity to God in Christ. **Kindness** means unconquerable benevolence even toward those who make themselves our enemies and persecutors; **generosity** means sacrificing to the point of heroism, not just what we have left over but even what we need; **faithfulness** means fidelity to Christ and to others, even and especially when it’s hard and everyone else is capitulating; **meekness** means the strength not to have to retaliate in the way the world seeks revenge and payback; **self-control** means the self-mastery so that we do what we ought and by God’s grace follow the Lord’s will in season and out of season. This is the **good fruit** that true prophets bear and help produce in those who receive their prophetic words and deeds on good soil.

All Christians are called to be prophets

How do we carry out our prophetic office in the world today? We share in Christ’s prophetic ministry by becoming living witnesses to him, especially by a life of faith and love, the offering of our every word and deed as sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God. When we speak or act, we do so in ways that give witness to Jesus, in-order-that others may encounter Him through us.

Only as much as we seek to be sustained and guided by the Spirit of Truth and our motivation is love of God and love of others (particularly those who persecute or reject us), we are participating in the prophetic office of Christ. Then, according to our faithfulness, the Kingdom is growing and spreading through the Spirit at work in us.

Prophets are those who take life as it is and expand it. They refuse to shrink a vision of tomorrow to the boundaries of yesterday.