The disciples of Jesus Christ must be willing to stand out, speak up and be different to the peoples of the world. Their lives must witness to the Gospel. They must remain undaunted, devoted and courageous unto death.

July 7th **The Shofar** *Mark 6:1-6*

God sends prophets to open our hearts

Once again we find our lectionary presenting significant challenges to those who strive to live the life of a Kingdom Christian. It is Ezekiel who first sets the tone for us with an uncompromising message from God and a ministry and mission that is guaranteed to make him one of the most despised men in Jerusalem. He is sent to *rebels* who have *rebelled against me*. It is not difficult to imagine how that message was received by those who thought they were remaining faithful to God and all was well with their Creator, Liberator and Heavenly Father!

In his calling, God makes it clear how those who serve him in this life will inevitably find themselves face to face with people whose hearts have been hardened. God calls these people a *rebellious house*. Ezekiel is to be a prophet among them in such a way that they will all understand *that a prophet has been among them.* That is a nice way of saying he will ruffle sanctimonious feathers. "how dare you" as most likely the normal response to them.

A biblical prophet is not seen in the way we use the word today. Predicting the future is not their primary task and if they do talk of the the future , it is always presented, good or bad as a consequence of the actions of the people. With God there is victory. On their own without God leading the way, they are doomed to destruction and loss – hence the exile in Babylon.

A prophet was a person who challenged the status quo, called out the unfaithful and the half-hearted and saw obedience to the will of God as the lens through which they were to view every person and everything. They did not compromise. I am yet to read of a popular prophet in the Bible. They unsettle us. They provoke us to hostile words and actions because they dare to challenge us.

Prophets call us out

They shatter the illusion that all is well in our faith worlds, that God is celebrating our faithfulness. We comfort ourselves that how we are living is alright in God's eyes without ever sitting before the throne of God and allowing the divine light into those darker sides of our life that no one sees.

In ways that can sometimes seem brutal and uncompromising, they called out those with a false conviction. What they offered in turn was the kind of faith and hope the Hebrew people were called upon to live out during their sojourn in the wilderness. The message from Moses to the people was clear: Repent. Return to the kind faithfulness God demands whatever the personal cost.

Paul and the ministry of pain

Paul understood that truth when he chose to respond to God. His vocation was much tougher than anything we could experience today. Faithfulness to God meant pain and death.

At one stage he was persecuting the Christians and sending them off to death. The next moment he was serving Christ and working for the growth and expansion of the Gospel to the very ends of the earth. There is no hint of compromise in his preaching. There is love. There is healing. There is the possibility of being forgiven and beginning again but never a hint of compromise. He stood up to the Apostles, to the leaders of the Jews and refused to bow down to the representatives of the Mighty Roman empire itself. Tertullian was correct. In his blood and in the blood of the other martyrs, the seed of faith was planted and took root in a hostile world.

There are many today who find the demands of Paul too arduous, his expectations too confronting in a world where power and might held sway. He expected those Christians to whom he was sent, to live the teachings of Christ on the Kingdom of God in such a way that they stood out from the unbelieving crowd

in which they were living. That teaching came at a cost. This is what the "thorn in the flesh" was all about. He prayed that God would relieve him of this unnamed weakness, this physical, spiritual or emotion baggage he carried as he ministered. He was called as he was, limitations and all.

But God did not take that burden from him. In Paul's struggles he was to find life, The promise God made was that the grace Paul was given was more than enough to enable him to succeed in divine ministry. But this was only true while he was faithful. People did not understand him. Not everyone appreciated him and his style and many refused to believe him and yet he spoke the Word of God, both in season and out of season.

Paul was a model prophet for us

That is the way the Church work today, how it has always worked. The People of God made their way to the land of milk and honey by following the cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night. They trusted in the God who called them even in the face of many challenges. Every sin led them to dead ends in the desert. It was sin that condemned them to remain out there until all of the people who had left Egypt had died and were buried in unmarked graves in the sandy wastelands. Only by following the Lord their God did life become milk and honey.

This was especially true once they entered Canaan. Faithfulness led to an abundance of life while being sucked into the ways of the world around them led to death of one kind or another. The prophetic message was clear: unfaithfulness to the Way of God led to invasion, exile and servitude under oppressive foreigners.

But they did not learn their lesson and continued to experiment with pagan ways. These pagan ways helped them to be invisible among the foreigners but being hidden away was not a divined expectation.

And so Paul, like the prophets of old, and like Jesus Himself, prepared himself for death in the face of opposition from those to whom he had been sent.

We all need God's prophets and all are called to be prophets of God in the community

No one likes to be challenged by a prophet. Few of us sit comfortably in their presence. Few, if any, respond with an open heart when being questioned by the Word of God. And who among us is ready and willing to have our Christian living challenged by prophetic words and deeds? Very few of us remain open to the kind of radical transformation Jesus demands. In the absence of the fear of being martyred for our faith we run the risk of building our faith-houses on foundations of sand.

We can so easily become content with our existing relationship with God. We can rationalise and justify our ways of living, even if those styles are at odds with the Gospel. What was once anathema can become normal, acceptable and to challenge that way of living is an invitation to exile and even death.

Only one road leads to God

These can be seen in an abundance of examples from today's world. It never ceases to amaze me, for example how our moral living sends out conflicting messages to unbelievers and believers alike. We will turn our eyes away from people living in relationships that are contrary to biblical expectations. Who is going to bring Christ's Kingdom challenges to men and women living together outside the sacrament of marriage? Who is going to want to bring the biblical message of a godly family being a man and a women together under God? That these relationships and these alone are the ones established by God at the time of creation and preached as a divine expectation for men and women of every age?

I pick those two examples only because they are commonplace today. We prefer to say nothing because it might offend, and offending is not permitted. We grow up pretending that God is open to all and everything people do if they can claim it is done in "love". We would rather live and let live than bring the magnifying glass of the Gospel to bear on our own lives or the lives of any other person. This is why prophets are never accepted.