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**

September 29th **The Shofar** Being Prophetic

God speaks in many and varied ways

One of the great hope-instilling texts of the New Testament comes from **John 16:13**… *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.* Of course, that leaves us with an important question: what is Truth? Fortunately, *Jesus* also gave us the answer to that as well: *I am the way, and the truth and the life* (**John 14: 6**). This is a great answer because it makes us reformulate the question. The correct way to ask it becomes not "***what*** *is* truth?", but instead "***who*** *is* truth?". It is this question men and women of the third millennium are seeking to answer for themselves. Sadly, they seek an answer in barren pastures for they know not God. We must, therefore, not be silent with answering this question because we know who the Truth really is! The Truth is Jesus Christ. He is the One who came into the world to reveal to us and give to us the Father's love. We are called to witness to this Truth not only with words but more especially with the way we live in the world. It is how the world sees us that is important. This is the fundamental role of every prophet of God. Live Jesus.

There are many prophets in the Bible and all of them spoke to the circumstances of their own lives, to the people of their own time. The central message of the prophets is their interpretation of contemporary events in the light of God's plan of salvation. But their messages were not always warm and fuzzy. They spoke the message God wanted His people to hear, even when it was something the world did not want to hear, what the world would reject. Most prophetic books stress the two sides of "the day of the Lord", the day when God will finally and definitively conquer evil and restore good.

The prophets made it clear that this day was not going to be as good and as wonderful as some of them thought it might be. They insisted God's people prepare for both aspects of this "day"—both the terror of the judgment and the everlasting peace of salvation and restoration. God was bringing judgment upon them for their covenant failures, a judgment that was aimed at purifying them, making them more empowered for the task to which they had been called. Accordingly, the prophets continually denounced sin—both personal sins and the unjust institutional situations which widespread personal sin creates—and they announce God's impending punishment, not just on Israel but on all the nations.

What is important for us to understand is how they interpreted the present sufferings that had come their way as the consequence of sin and infidelity. Most importantly, they teach that all suffering and all Divine punishment have but a single purpose: to stir us to repentance, to cause us to return to the Lord. That was the prophet's role.

The prophetic voice of encouragement

Through the prophets, God reveals Himself as the Father we defy and the Husband whom we betray through our flirting with the gods of the people around them. His love is so deep that He punishes out of love, a punishment tempered by mercy. It is a punishment He allows so that we turn back to Him and remember that we are dependent on Him. Only then can he shower us with an abundance of love, a richness of blessings, prosperity, joy and most of all an enduring peace.

This key prophetic message itself is certainly encouraging, but the way it is delivered also carries encouragement. We hear this message in many different voices from the prophets. One will emphasize the sins of "the nations", another the shortcomings of Israel, a third the Providence of God, a fourth His fidelity to the Covenant, another the steadiness of God as Father, then they talk of the passion of God as Lover of his bride Israel.

This then is the very same message all the baptised are called upon to proclaim as Christian prophets. It is a message we are to proclaim both in season and out of season. There is no one way of proclaiming it, no single set of words. All of us are called to speak the appropriate word to the moment in which we are living. Like our ancestors the prophets, we are to denounce sin and explain why it is wrong; to unveil suffering as God's means to bring us to our senses, purge us of our sins, and draw us into ever closer union with Himself and with our brothers and sisters. As

prophets we are to impregnate the frightful situations in which we and our neighbours can find ourselves living with God's loving Providence; to warn others of the impending judgment while holding out the promise of ultimate restoration. Just as it was with the prophets, each of us is, in different circumstance, with different talents, and dealing with different kinds of people, gifted with a message to proclaim. Sometimes we are called upon to call out sin in the world, to name the evil that is eating away at the world even when they do not even know it. Prophets are to stand up and speak when the world celebrates that which God does not condone, when they have allowed themselves to be seduced by the baubles and wily ways of Satan to. That takes courage, the kind of courage only possible through God's abundant grace. Then, at other times, we are called to offer a vision of love and forgiveness, of mercy and divine loving kindness and to do so in ways that do not to *break the bruised reed*. We are to be prophets unlike the ways of the Pharisees who weigh people down with the burdens of religion but offer them nothing in way of bearing those loads. As with the Hebrew prophets, our message may be starkly harsh or creatively gentle. It may be militant or tender. We are to be signs of the times. God's signs.

We are all called to go to Nineveh

However it is that we carry out our ministries, the message must always be the same: to draw people back to God, to bring them home. This is the essence of prophecy, and it does not matter whether we can work miracles or predict future events, whether we are ordained or lay what God expects of us is the same. What matters is that we stop running away our baptismal responsibilities like Jonah did. We have been called and empowered to turn toward our own Nineveh with God's message in our heart and on our lips. What matters is that we understand the very deepest reality, that if the day of the Lord begins in suffering and we remain confident that it will end in ecstatic love. This is our message—the message which all of us, baptized prophets, must never fear to speak.

In most cases, the biblical prophets were not in the business of predicting the future. There were soothsayers for that. Their focus was on revealing something important about what God was saying to people in the preset. though sometimes that might have implications for the future. The word "prophet" means "one who speaks for another." In the Hebrew scriptures prophets spoke for God. Their visions, revelations, and other intense mystical experiences gave them a certain standing and authority to speak in the name of God and to bring the people—kings included—to task for superstitious beliefs, idolatry, injustices and moral failings. Prophets brought the word of God alive to a people who needed to be reminded of it.

Jesus comes into the midst of God's people, into the midst of the human family to be the Prophet who not only speaks on behalf of God, but whose very presence, whose very life, whose very being is a message about God, a message enabling us to know God deeply by knowing Jesus. He is the Prophet who is sent by God and who is himself God-among-us, Immanuel. It is to collaborate with the works of God that we are also called to be prophets, and we must understand as Ezekiel did, that people may not listen. They may reject the prophet. This is what Jesus was warning about when he commanded that those who follow Him follow Him along the way of the Cross.

Prophesy is a gift for the Church

Paul's well-known list of those with particular gifts in the church includes prophets (**1 Corinthian 12:28**), and he exhorts his brothers and sisters in faith *to pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, including prophecy* (**1 Cor. 14:3**). Prophecy for Paul seemed to involve those who spoke with grace-filled insights and wisdom about the things of God. But it was not an unlimited gift. To discern what was false from true prophecy, Paul said prophesying had to be an orderly activity subject to other prophets' testing. As it is with all spiritual gifts, prophecy is given for the "building up" of the community, not for destroying it. There were no independent prophets who operated without the affirmation of the Body of Christ

Prophets help the community see through the present, to recognize God's action breaking into our life. The difficulty of this ministry is rooted in the nature of the present – all the duties, delights, and distractions that fill our day. The present absorbs our attention: the good we are doing and the troubles we are avoiding conspire to consume us.

Prophets work through current events with an eye to the past, present, and future to help explain God's actions and words to those who do not know Him.