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Real prophets

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

Immediately after Paul's oft-quoted 1 Corinthians 13 pericope on the importance of integrating love into every gift of the Spirit, he encourages his community, "Strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts, above all that you may prophesy?" (14:1).



Prophecy is the normal biblical way of surfacing God's will in one's life. Though Catholics look to the hierarchy and Protestants open their Bibles to discover God's plan for them, the people who gave us our Scriptures obviously had neither the Bible nor a hierarchical structure as we know it to fall back on. They believed God had blessed certain individuals in their midst with a special gift of knowing God's will in specific situations. People of faith were expected to find those insightful persons, listen to them and then carry out their message.

Paul was convinced that prophecy is essential for any Christian community. If you don't have prophets, you'll be walking in the dark, not knowing what direction to go.

There are two basic definitions of biblical prophets. The first is by Fr. Bruce Vawter, who made it the title of his famous book *The Conscience of Israel*. The second is from one of world's experts on biblical prophecy, Hans Walter Wolff, who always referred to prophets as the people in our midst who inform us of the future implications of our present actions. Either definition is correct; each simply focuses on different aspects of prophetic ministry.

Because prophecy was the accepted scriptural way of discovering God's will, it didn't take long for those in authority to create a system of court and shrine prophets: people who basically proclaimed the will of the king or priests, but did so in Yahweh's name. Our sacred authors sometimes referred to such institutional pawns as people who "ate at the king's or priests' table." They could always be counted on to deliver the party line, rarely the will of God.

This created a logical problem for the faithful: How can you tell authentic prophets from fake prophets?

Among the list of characteristics our sacred authors developed to distinguish true prophets from fake prophets, three stand out in today's readings.

First, an authentic prophet always takes us back to the beginnings of our faith, as today's Hebrews author does. "[We must] persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith." Jesus, not the institution, is the reason we believe.

Second, real prophets suffer because of the message they proclaim. This is clearly at the heart of our Jeremiah and Lucan pericopes.

Most Judean authorities want Jeremiah dead. In the early days of his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah worked hard to reform both the civil and religious institutions. But as the years passed, he began to realize neither was going to change significantly. Eventually he reached the drastic conclusion that the only way to achieve reform was for the present institutions to be destroyed and new ones created, ones that would follow Yahweh's will.

This insight led the prophet to engage in "treasonous activities," encouraging Jerusalem's sixth century B.C. defenders to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar's besieging army and go off into exile. He hoped that being geographically distant from the Holy Land, well-meaning Jews would rebuild their civil and religious structures according to the plan Yahweh had for Yahweh's people.

No wonder Jeremiah is accused of "demoralizing the soldiers." The penalty for such an action is death.

Fortunately, the prophet still has one sympathizer at court, Ebed-melech, who is able to save his life -- this time. But Jeremiah's prophetic struggle and suffering will continue for the rest of his life.

Third, Luke's Jesus tells us why so many good folk find it difficult to carry through on the things authentic prophets teach. Not only does the prophet suffer, those who follow the prophet also suffer.

"Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?" Luke's prophetic Jesus asks. "No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on ..."

Jesus expects the same prophetic fire that burns in him to burn also in his followers' hearts. Because there's a certain amount of prophecy in the ministry of all other Christs, there's also a certain amount of suffering in their lives, especially in their relations with those closest to them, those most affected by their

faith.

As an itinerant preacher, the historical Jesus wasn't interested in giving his audiences new 'stuff' to think about; he was concerned with helping them acquire a new way of processing all information, new and old. He prophetically demanded they return to the mindset of their faith ancestors, a mindset in which people are more important than laws, relationships more important than institutions.

Those determined to acquire that mindset had better get used to suffering.

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