

Today we lit the second of our Advent candles to commemorate the Prophets.

To understand the unique contribution to our contemporary faith made by the OT Prophets – and their later, Christian counterparts, the Mystics – we need to look no further than their attitudes to the dynamic between on the one hand faith and on the other hand organised religion.

Let me explain what I mean.

On the one hand, it seems to me that, at its core, faith is about relationship with God.

God, we know, is Holy Trinity; so at the core of God is relationship; relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The history of the Bible is all about God choosing to call us into relationship with God. God does this again and again, in an assortment of ways depending on time and place and the spiritual maturity of the people concerned.

For Christians today, faith is all about recognising and responding to the Presence of God in day-to-day life; it is about being in a relationship with God in the here and now. So, faith has *flexibility* and *immediacy*. Faith is our *being* in the '*now*' with God.

On the other hand, it seems to me that, at its core, organised religion, whether Jewish or Christian (or, indeed, most of the great world religions) institutionalises faith, and creates inflexibility for the believer. We see this in Jewish Law and custom. We see it in the Christian emphasis on creedal 'Belief' over relational 'Faith'. We see it in our divisive denominational separations, which are all founded on what we each intellectually believe, *not* on our fundamental faith, *not* on our relationship with God.

Organised religion takes preferred norms of behaviour and presents them as inflexible laws to which all must conform, and then reinforces this with a conformist culture. Organised religion presents relationship with God as conditional on human action; whereas, in fact, faith is conditional *only* on human perception.

It is into this dynamic between faith and organised religion that the Prophets and the Mystics speak.

The Judeo-Christian Tradition has always had its Prophets.

Prophets were people who recognised when organised religion had gone too far in its institutionalisation, and in its regulation and, sometimes, in strangling the breath out of faith. Prophets were people who recognised that God was calling all people into a flexible relationship with God *appropriate to them*; into day-to-day, flexible dependence on God. And they did rather dramatic things to point out to organised religion *precisely where they had got in wrong*, and what they needed to do to put it right.

So, Elijah denounced the organised religion of his day and then fled the monarchy's reaction to Elijah's radical solution (to kill the false prophets). Note that Elijah found God speaking to him, not in the powerful turbulence of the day, but in the stillness and in the silence, where God's voice can still be heard.

So, Daniel lived apart from the defilement of Babylon, practicing his faith in God in private. When he explained the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's licentious feast, at which vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem were defiled; he delivered a message of God's judgement and future disaster for the Chaldean Empire. Daniel's close relationship with God allowed him to speak Truth to Power.

So, Jonah *fled* the Lord's initial instruction to denounce the sinful practices of the great city of Nineveh. BUT, *it was when he was dependent on God for his personal survival* that Jonah came to his senses and followed the Will of God. Many people today do the same: it is only when we are dependent on God *for survival* that we actually listen to God and do his will.

So, John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading practiced a personal faith stripped of the externals of organised religion (no Temple sacrifice, no intellectual and social approach of the Synagogue). He also stressed the need for a personal initiation ceremony (Baptism) to emphasise entry into a day-to-day faith dependence on God. He emphasised getting back to the basics of faith in God and relationship with God, which could be had anywhere, even in the desert wilderness stripped of the trappings of organised religion.

**Thus**, the prophets emphasised and embodied **faith** and a personal relationship with God, and denounced the errors and excesses of the organised religion of their day.

The Christian religion has always had its Mystics, stretching back to the ascetic desert Fathers and Mothers of the first century. Christian Mystics, like the Prophets before them, have called the Church back from its institutional excesses to the core of Christian spirituality, which could be had just as easily – no, could be had *more* easily – in a small cell like that of Dame Julian of Norwich, than in a cathedral church in a great metropolis.

The mystics stressed the personal journey deeper into God, which we are all called to make. Their insights into the love God has for us are remarkable. St Teresa of Avila saw a Christian life of prayer and meditation as walking through the rooms of a castle into union with God. In one of her exercises, she suggested we imagine Jesus sitting in a chair opposite us, looking at us first lovingly and then humbly. Just imagine the impact of Jesus sitting opposite you and humbly saying 'I love you'. It is that intimacy with God that the Mystics stress.

The Mystics have also called the church back from its intellectual and theological excesses. Nothing that our Anglican theological colleges have produced has been so far reaching as the simple, lived-out assurance of Mother Julian that, in a day-to-day relationship of dependence on God '*All will be well; All will be very well.*'; that is the conviction that God knows what God is doing – even when we don't!

**Thus**, the Mystics, like the prophets before them, emphasised and embodied **faith**, a personal journey into God, and were –and still are –a corrective to the over-dogmatic intellectualism, and institutional focus of the Church today.

We Christian believers need to hear the voice of the Prophets and Mystics today, calling us back to the fundamental, flexible core of personal relationship with God and day-to-day dependence of faith. We need to hear the voice from the ascetic wilderness to put into perspective the voice of institutional power. We need to hear the voice of risky relationship with the Divine above the clamorous voices absorbed with the maintenance and worldliness of organised religion.

So where is the Prophetic, Mystic voice the Church in England? in our Diocese? in the Bristol West deanery? in St Peter's Henleaze?

Be still and listen carefully in the silence... and you may find, like Elijah and the Prophets and Mystics before you, that you will hear that still small voice of God voice speaking directly to *you*.

Hear the whisper of God in the silence; as well as hearing the voice of John crying in the wilderness: *Prepare the way of the Lord.*

Amen.