

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2 | 09.12.2018

Words, words, words! Haven't we all heard enough words in the Brexit debate to last us a life-time?! And strangely, the more words we hear the less confident we feel that any of the politicians are able to help us work out what the future will look like. Watching 'Question Time' on BBC1 the other night was excruciating. Sitting there in the warm TV studio, you could see each of the panelists floundering – repeating over and over again: *we just don't know what will happen. But trust me, trust my party...*

In the Old Testament tradition, the leaders of opinion were the Prophets, seen in the books of Joshua through to Micah who wrote our first reading. And you might well think that the word prophet meant that these were the people whose job it was to stand up and tell people what the future held: to declare with God's help exactly what was going to happen - and when.

But if so, you would be wrong. What these books invite us to do is to learn to interpret current events in the light of what has happened in the past. Psalm 78 says: *Listen, my people, to what I have to say; for I will speak to you in parables so that you may understand the hidden lessons of the past.* In other words, if you want to know the future, the big lessons are there in the events that have already taken place. Prophecy is not knowing the future: it is pointing out how (using the lyrics of Justin Timberlake) *'what goes around, comes around'*.

Which is why, with Brexit as with almost anything, we are forced back to core principles and to key ideas. So we have heard from Archbishop Justin Welby this week the appeal to make sure that whatever political solutions emerge, that the poorest in our society do not end up by paying the highest price: *It must be the clear policy of this and any future governments, after so many years of austerity borne so often by the poorest, that the burden of the transition to a post EU economy must be carried by those with the broadest shoulders – the wealthiest – and not by further cuts, whether in local services, social care, benefits, the armed forces, climate change budgets, education or others that have lost so much in recent years.*

A point of view that needs to be heard, of course it does.

But in a sense such a statement doesn't go to the heart of what prophetic ministry is all about. Standing in the House of Lords among likeminded people, it is relatively easy to say all the right things.

For at the heart of true prophecy there has to be a connection between the words being delivered and the lives of the people speaking, the pain to be borne by the one who would influence others. Let me tell you a story.

Way back in 2003 Fr Tony Coote was a chaplain at University College in Dublin. He was accessible and well liked but, as he would be first to admit, his influence over the students there was pretty limited. One of his best initiatives was to start an overseas volunteering programme in Haiti and a number of students kept in touch with him after they graduated because they recognised how much of Tony went into making that programme work.

Brought up in a single parent family, friends describe how he had an eye for suffering and an eye for understanding people and families and what they were going through. As one said, *Tony was one of the least judgmental people I ever met.* In time he left UCD and became the parish priest of Mount Merrion and Kilmagud.

And it was there that he was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease.

You may know how MND works; it is a neurological disease that systematically eats away at the links between the brain and every moving part in the body so that the sufferer is literally incapable of doing anything for themselves. Sadly it often strikes people in middle age (Fr Tony is just 54) and not only robs them of their mobility but also their ability to communicate. And it is area which has been badly starved of research funding; there have been no new break-throughs in understanding the causes of Motor Neurone Disease for 20years.

But instead of creeping into a corner and feeling sorry for himself, Fr Tony's understanding of himself and the role God was placing on him grew immeasurably. In a recent documentary called *Walk the Walk*, someone asked: "isn't this all a very heavy cross to bear?" His reply was: *In a way it is a very heavy cross, but I don't find that I am carrying it alone. I feel that Jesus who went before me is in some way lifting the burden of the cross. I believe that we are in some sort of boat of life, in a stormy sea, but we are not alone and we have not been cast adrift. I think the meaning of Jesus Christ being on earth was to demonstrate that God is never far away from each one of us...*

As public attention began to focus on this priest with Motor Neurone Disease and on his ability to continue to serve in his parish, so Fr Tony has found himself talking about the issues that clearly worried – and indeed annoyed - him.

He has begun to talk about the way his mother was treated when her marriage failed, how she was left out of social functions and was made to feel guilty – even in her local Church. *In the Gospels Jesus never condemned any group that he met but the Church doles that every time it starts to ostracise certain groups that are different – people from broken homes, people who are gay. It so often picks on just the kinds of people who already feel alone and unloved.*

And because of the effort that was now required for him to say anything, people began to listen to Fr Tony Coote with a new intensity. They vaguely remembered the things he had said as a University chaplain but now many of them felt they wanted to do something much more positive – not just to support him and other MND sufferers but to make sure that his prophetic voice was heard.

So last summer, a whole heap of them took to the highways and byways of Ireland. The aim was to raise as much money as possible to support Motor Neurone Disease research. The journey stretched over 300 miles - from Donegal to Cork – and they pushed Fr Tony, in a wheelchair, every inch of the way. All told they raised amazing £490,000 in the process.

Today our churches celebrate the raising up of prophets – not just biblical ones but those we regard as prophets in history people like Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, Oscar Romero or Nelson Mandela. But in every case we look not just at their words and the changes in their societies that they achieved; we also look at the cost they were prepared to pay so that those prophecies could be heard.

In the same way, in the context of the Brexit debate, aren't we also going to ask those who have so many opinions on our future if they are really willing live out the consequences of their opinions? IF the nation as a whole is going to be poorer because of our decision to leave the EU (and that is only one view I know), then surely Archbishop Justin's question will need to be heard again and again: *who is going to bear the bulk of that pain?* As he says, it would be wholly wrong to expect the poorest in our society to pick up the bill after a decade of austerity: it has to be those with the broadest shoulders.

And that means him, sitting in his palace at Lambeth. And it means you and me. If we hear God's call to be his voices in the world - prophetic signs in our generation, descendants of the great prophets of the past - we too have to decide what we are prepared to sacrifice to ensure that what we say has real integrity.

How willing are we to put our hands in our pockets to support what we believe?

As someone said to me this week, our wallets and purses are always the last to hear the Gospel! God has, is - and always will - raise up messengers to make his will known. But, strange as it may seem, they aren't often the professional, articulate middle classes who have filled our airwaves for the last two years.

Instead they are tend to be much more like John the Baptist who always lived on the margins of his society, shouting from the River Jordan for people to follow his example. They will be like St Paul, the otherwise obscure Roman policeman writing to the Philippians from his corner of a damp prison cell. They may well be someone like Jo Cox the back-bench MP, murdered outside her constituency office in Batley.

Yes, all of us can talk! We all have opinions – and that is right and proper. But if our nation is to have any hope of reuniting in the future it has to raise up leaders who understand what prophecy is all about and who are seen to be prepared to suffer for the benefit of those they serve.

Prepare the way of the Lord, said John the Baptist for every mountain shall be made low and the crooked ways made straight. But no sooner had John Baptist said these words then Herod took fright and had him executed for fear of what he might say next.

Pray God that in these very uncertain times when words are cheap, we will be willing to be good prophets in our own contexts – and will show in the sacrifices we make that we too are willing to pay the price that right decisions will demand of us.

Like Fr Tony Coote, currently dying of Motor Neurone Disease, it is only when those around us see our real level of commitment to the will of God that they will stand up and take notice – and as a result will be able to experience the love of God that he has asked us to share.