

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2 | 06.12.20

Isaiah 40: 1-11; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; St Matthew 23: 27-28, 33-34, 37-39

I am sure you are as familiar with this as I am: the phone rings and there is a quite a long pause at the other end. Then there is a slightly faint voice sounding like it is coming from somewhere a very long way away: *Is that Mr Burneysteen? O dear, it's yet another foreign caller trying to cope with my somewhat unfamiliar name? How are you today...*

I don't know whether you remember that scene in the film, 'the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel' where Judy Dench is needing work in Bombay and ends up training local operatives in a call centre. It's priceless: and of course it is exactly this sort of dialogue that she tears to pieces. As she says (and I can't do the voice) *from this we are instantly aware of two things: they don't care a fig for how we are ... but they do want to sell us something!*

As we come to the end of the year, you may have noticed the return of a number of features filling our news feeds and newspapers. There are always lists: the most popular boys and girls names, new words that have made it into the Oxford Dictionary in 2020 (you won't be surprised they include unmute, mail-in, coronavirus and lockdown), the names of famous people who have died and those who have 'made the headlines' for all sorts of reasons – and a rather strange graph which shows which professions are on their way up in terms of popular appreciation, and which ones are going down.

This last list has been running for such a long time that they can tell us that, 40 years ago, bank managers were more highly respected than doctors and nurses and both teachers and clergy were somewhere in the middle. Since then doctors and nurses have shot up, along with teachers, while bank managers and clergy have nose-dived. Barely a third of regular churchgoers think their clergy deserve a tick in terms of honesty and ethical standards and only 13% would ever think to ask their clergy for advice.

So when, in today's Gospel, Jesus tears into the Pharisees as hypocrites and 'whitewashed tombs', you might say that not that much has changed! Not since Gallup began charting the reputations of professionals way back in 1977 has respect for the clergy been so low.

Today our Advent theme is 'the Prophets' and next week we will look in more detail at one of them, the outspoken voice in the wilderness who also happened to be Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

But what does the word prophet bring to mind? If I ask you, what is the link between Galileo and Alan Turing the second world war code breaker, the answer would have to be that they were both extraordinary people whom we know now to have had amazing insights and who were well ahead of their time – and yet who were not just 'not believed' but were persecuted relentlessly by the authorities of their day.

To be a prophet, to have ideas that challenge the status quo, has always be a recipe for losing friends and losing credibility. By and large most of us don't actually like being challenged by 'off the wall' insights - and most original thinkers have had to suffer for not giving way to the prevailing wisdom of their day. Prophets can be a bit like salespeople: they put us under a certain amount of pressure and we do, what I am afraid many of us do when we get those unsolicited calls, we put the phone down – with or without a polite 'thank-you for calling'. As Jesus said, *I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify and some you will flog in your synagogues...*

So is there a way for prophets – clergy or not – to be listened to in the fast and furious culture in which we live? Hasn't their place been completely undermined by scandals of one sort or another - and by Mr Google and the ability of anyone (as Peter Marty wrote in an amusing blog) to *find out how to perform an emergency appendectomy, eradicate bats from an attic, and learn Swahili: surely a priest today needs to be more than a resident expert, theological or otherwise?*

To be honest I am not sure that knowledge has that much to do with being a prophet. An ability to discern the signs of the times is part of the mix but my feeling is that there are two other characteristics that are needed by good prophets.

Whenever I am not sure whether we have got things right at St James', one of the people I consult is Alison Rice. Alison is a broadcaster, a local resident and expert on travel - but she is not a Churchgoer.

So when I wanted to give Joe Ammoun our student in training the opportunity to see what is going on ‘from outside’ so to speak, I invited Alison to sit at one end of a long bench in Arlington Square and share with Joe some of her reflections. And the great compliment she paid him was that he came across as genuine – and a good listener. He was wasn’t trying to push her to believe anything or to do anything; he was just ‘there’ and that gave her space to make connections she might not have made otherwise.

And the other characteristic? I think it is the Galileo/Turing thing. A prophet may well have to be prepared to be quite stubborn, willing to suffer for the truth they have been entrusted with.

That was certainly true for all the great Old Testament prophets as Jesus said. And it was true for many of those whom we discussed in Rowan Williams’ book ‘Luminaries’ last week – people like St Alban, Oscar Romero and Florence Nightingale. Because the call of Isaiah 40, about preparing the way of the Lord *where valleys will be ironed out and mountains and hills are reduced to flat plains* – is nothing to do with topography and everything to do with what happens when God is at work. It is all about the way we cope with change. All the stuff around us which we think is permanent Isaiah describes as mere ‘grass’: *when the breath of the Lord passes over it you will see it no more.*

Being prophetic – being prophetic as a community – Peter Marty says, is often about *being emotionally secure enough to weather the depressingly changeable nature of public opinion; about seeing the bigger picture, working out how we can use what we have well - but always in the light of the extraordinary plans that God has in mind. Being prophetic demands that we are not fobbed off with easy solutions or worrying overmuch about what people of think of us. Being prophetic demands the highest level of listening – asking how others are - and really wanting to know the answer!*

So how might we live prophetically here at St James’? Most of all, I believe it is by developing that restlessness caught in the song we heard after the 1st reading – attempting to build bridges with anyone and everyone, reaching out to those whose lives and outlooks are very different from our own, living with the discomfort of engaging with the world as it is as part of God’s new way of doing things, laying aside any notion that staying as we are is enough.