



## DREAMING DREAMS & SEEING VISIONS

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP GREGORY  
for Thursday, 16th July, 2020

One of the gifts of the Spirit acknowledged in Scripture, and very active in the life of the both the Old and New Testaments, is the gift of Prophecy. One of the prophets, Joel, told us to expect a lot more of it. He wrote: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your youth will see visions, your elderly will dream dreams.”, and when Pentecost came, the apostles told us that in the life of the Church, we were to see this scripture being fulfilled. So where is prophecy today?

I think that there are two things to help us to recognise prophecy in its biblical understanding. First, is that it is less to do with predicting the future, and more about speaking about the consequences of what God is saying to the world now. I’ve seen shelves of bookshops filled with “the Prophecies of Nostradamus” which are nothing to do with true prophecy, which is designed to bring home to us the truths that God is summoning us to obey. It is, as someone put it, “reading the signs of the times”.

Second, it is highly political. So many people get prickly when Church leaders speak into political situations, and tell us to mind our own business, when in truth I think they mean that they’d like religion to be locked away from grubby realities, separated from truths they’d prefer not to have to face. The Prophets in the Bible – all of them, including Jesus – spoke the truth to the rich and powerful of the day, and often provoked just that negative response: how dare you? It’s why so many of them were killed.

So where is prophecy today? Some Christians look for something thrilling to come out of ecstatic worship, but I think that prophecy occurs when faith and wisdom go hand in hand: the wisdom to perceive how God is challenging us now. And there are many prophets among us – one such is John Bell, of the Iona Community. A couple of weeks ago he spoke during BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship, and I felt that in what he said then he was being prophetic, asking what were the consequences of our Christian belief, and demonstrating how they must impact on the way we build our world. Here is some of what he had to say:

“If we believe, as Jesus says, ‘you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free’, do we want children in the future to be as ignorant of the past as many or most of us adults have been? I mean, I had to wait until I was fifty to discover that Scotland had owned a third of the slave plantations in Jamaica, and that the Victorian opulence of Glasgow and other British cities was the result of the trans-Atlantic transport of enslaved Africans, tacitly condoned by Christian churches. Do we have to wait for statues to be toppled before we own our past?

“If we believe that Jesus declared there is good news for the poor, and if we know that poverty has grown in our nation, and that people living in poor neighbourhoods are far more likely to die from Covid 19 than the wealthy, are we prepared to identify the root causes, and to treat those who are economically disadvantaged with dignity in

the future? Or do we have to pray for another sporting personality or stage celebrity to name an injustice before it is rectified?

“If we believe that God loves the world, and we know that, in the world God loves, everything from the Australian coral reef to the Amazon rain forest to the Arctic Pole and even the humble bumble bee are all threatened by human failure to respect the integrity of creation, are we going to continue living so irresponsibly that the children of tomorrow will have to go to museums to see what we regard as commonplace today?

“If we believe that Jesus has mandated his disciples to heal the sick, are we going to live in the expectation that huge pharmaceutical companies and better medical technology will come up with the solutions? Or should we at least consider personal responsibility and preventative rather than responsive medicine?

“If we believe that Jesus cares that prisoners be released, and we know that the causes of crime are very often rooted in childhood trauma or deprivation, are we just going to build more prisons, or look at what can be done to prevent vulnerable people becoming potential offenders?

“And if we believe from the evidence of the gospels, that Jesus spent a hundred times more of his life on issues of healing, teaching, evangelism, and engaging face to face with people, than he ever did on bricks and mortar, are we going to go to shape the future of the church according to his priorities or remain obsessed by the upkeep of buildings and structures some of which have long been obsolete?”

This is the stuff of prophecy for me, because John takes fundamental truths that we recognise about God, and applies them quite directly to our responsibility for things that are going on in the world. Some of them, if not all of them, may make us quite uncomfortable – but that is what God does, he wants to move us from where we are, to building, under his guidance and with his grace, the Kingdom of God. The challenge is – what happens next? Jesus often finished his parables with “Let the one who has ears to hear, listen!”, “and”, we might add, “take action.”

I’ve said before that coming out of lockdown would be the time when the lessons of lockdown need to be learned. That moment is now, and how shall we respond to God’s prompting and to the prophecy happening in our midst?

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