**Sermon Sunday 5th December 2021 Advent 2 by the Revd Colin Hurford**

**(In lighting today’s Advent Candle we remember the prophets and their message)**

Malachi 3.1-4

Luke 3.1-6

These blessed prophets.  Samuel, Elijah, Elisha together with Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel are classed as the major prophets and then there are the minor prophets - twelve of them - Amos, Hosea, and Daniel are perhaps the best known and some of the others have strange names - Obadiah meaning “one who serves God” whose main distinction is that his is the shortest book in the Old Testament. Then there’s Habakuk, whose name means “wrestler” or “he that embraces” … I could go on.  The basic origin of the word “prophet” is to proclaim” and when used in the religious sense, it is very much associated with “proclaiming the word of God”.

I started off by saying “blessed” prophets and that can mean truly blessed by God in the sense we speak of the blessed virgin Mary but many people would describe them as “blasted Prophets”.  For often their message was  not welcomed by those who heard it.  Amos is berated for prophesying in the north and told in no uncertain terms “go, flee to the land of Judah and prophecy there”.  Jeremiah led a very precarious existence - his life was threatened several times and he was thrown into a pit and left there to die. Fortunately he was rescued by an Ethiopian.  Neither Amos or Jeremiah wanted to be prophets - “I was a shepherd and tender of sycamore trees” cried Amos but the Lord said to me, “Go prophecy to the people of Israel.”  Jeremiah protests, “‘Lord God. Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.’  But God touched Jeremiah and said, “Now I have put my words into your mouth.”  And that is what a Christian prophet does - he speaks words given by God to those whom God has sent.  It is true that the words must be tested and the Bible speaks often about false prophets.  But the genuine prophet is speaking out words inspired by God.

Most of the Old Testament prophets spoke about their own times but some were inspired to speak words that they did not realise would apply to Jesus some hundreds of years later. Think of the awesome words of Isaiah “He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”  The Old Testament reading you have just heard gives us such an example. The prophet Malachi (his is the last book of the Old Testament and his name means ‘messenger’) may well have been speaking of his time but his words foretell the coming of John the Baptist. “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.”  John the Baptist himself doesn’t use these words but quotes words from Isaiah, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord,” words which suggest the custom of sending ambassadors to prepare the way for the coming of a monarch.

There was a huge gap - some four hundred years - between the last prophetic work of Malachi and the preaching of John the Baptist which is why the people were so excited by John but prophecy didn’t end with the coming of John.  Jesus Himself was a prophet as we heard in the Gospel reading last week, and in the Acts of the Apostles and early church, the gift of prophecy, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, was very much alive.  The book of Acts records that the prophet Agabus warned Paul that he would be handed over to the gentiles.  St. Paul himself, writing to the Corinthians urges them  “eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.”  But today - how far do we really listen to Paul’s words?  I’m afraid the voice of prophecy is rarely heard in the church of today - and boy, how much do we need it!  We need it for our country, we need it for our church.

It is to the church’s shame that the one to speak openly about the plight of hungry children is an inspired footballer, Marcus Rashford.  And the two main people really to get to grips with climate change are an old man of 95, David Attenborough and a person who started just as a schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg and still only 18 speaking to princes and rulers. Perhaps I should include Prince Charles who is a Christian voice.  Both Marcus Rashford and Greta Thunberg, like prophets of old, have been criticised by the Government - ‘stick to football and don’t interfere in politics’, ‘children get back to school and leave it to your elders.’  Personally I have written to both Archbishops but got virtually non replies from their secretaries.  Yet how we need, and forgive me for saying this but the situation is so grave it needs saying, how we need Christians to speak out again some of the appalling policies of our present Government.  I don’t usually criticise Governments in sermons - but when you think about the Prime Minister almost secretly introducing a care bill completely favouring  the rich, of the Home Secretary’s bill about peaceful protests (The Rev’d Ian Ross has written about that in the magazine) of the proposed legislation restricting voting rights only to people who register together with the appalling attitude to refugees from one whose parents were refugees - I could go on.   How we need prophets to speak to our nation!

But stop - before we get worked up about that, we must first look at ourselves - where  is the gift of prophecy found in local churches, in our church? Where are the people to speak God’s word to congregations, to PCCs, to Synods, to the church as a whole?  Prophecy need not be strident.  It could simply be a person who has prayed and feels he or she (it is often women who have the gift) saying I think God is guiding us along this path, not being afraid speaking out words given by God.

So I urge you to pray that God will raise up people in our church with the gift of prophecy and that the people of the church will listen. Pray also, with deep conviction, that God will raise up people to speak to our nation.

Rev’d Colin Hurford