

## 20140629ThirdAfterPentecostSermon

When we read a passage from any Gospel we must remember that it wasn't written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John because they felt inspirationally moved to write the life story of Jesus. In fact, the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus at all, but theological treatise. This is why the so-called Historical Jesus Movement sprung up in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and continues through to today. Academics belonging to this movement seek to find the historical Jesus behind the dogmatic Jesus of the Gospel.

Today's Gospel is a good example of this. Matthew wrote his Gospel to his church, his congregation, encouraging them as they faced persecution. His church was only formed after Jesus' death and resurrection. But now they, like the founder they had followed, were undergoing persecution. So Matthew is telling them that Jesus had predicted this, he if you like, had prophesied it.

So although we have Jesus speaking in our Gospel, the question is; "Are these the words Jesus really said?" I like the way one commentator put it, he says: "For Matthew, Jesus is the risen Jesus continuing to speak to Matthew's congregation." So the whole of Chapter 10:1-42 is, as far as Matthew was concerned, the risen Jesus preparing members of Matthew's congregation for the conditions they would face as they tried to obey Jesus' Great Commission of making disciples of all nations.

What those Church members had to do was to take the Good News out to others. And the Good News that Jesus brought is not only prophetic, but it is the essence of all biblical prophecy. We who are looking forward to Christ's return should have more than mere casual interest in prophecy; we should be practising it. In today's Gospel Jesus says: *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.* What did he mean? If this passage was written by Matthew to encourage and build up his congregation in their endeavours to spread the Good News in the face of opposition and persecution, then was he saying that they have to be prophets? If so, does it mean that we must be prophets too?

Well, Paul writing to the Ephesians tells them that the Church is built on the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone of that foundation. So the church is built upon the apostles and the prophets and the words they wrote. They not only prophesied (that is, foretold events), but they also gave us a great deal of our church doctrine, the teachings we believe and after which we pattern our lives. And us Christians who have followed in the steps of the apostles continue to do the same today – to prophesy and develop doctrine.

But what is a prophet? In Hebrew three words are usually translated into the English words "prophet" or "seer." These three Hebrew words are *nabi*, *roeh*, and *hozeh*. "Nabi" literally means "to bubble up." It describes one who is stirred up in spirit. This is the word most frequently used by the Hebrew writers. When the sense of "bubbling up" is applied to speaking, it becomes "to announce" or "to call" or "to declare." Hence, a *nabi*, or a prophet, is an announcer - one who pours forth the declarations of God. "Roeh" means literally "to see" or "to perceive." It is generally used to describe one who is a revealer of secrets; one who envisions. "Hozeh" also means "to see" or "to perceive," but is used to indicate a person who was a counsellor or an advisor to a king. In Greek, that is in the New Testament, a prophet is simply understood to mean "one who speaks for another" - one who speaks for God, and so interprets God's will to the people. Hence, the essential meaning in Greek is "interpreter." So to summarise: A prophet is one who speaks for God. He is a representative who carries a message. He is an expounder of God's word.

Now, I'm sure you've already realised that quite a few people might claim to speak for God, to bring a message from God and expound on God's word. In fact, you could say all preachers should be doing that. The trouble is how do we know what comes from God and what is false prophecy. In other words, who is a false prophet?

Our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Jeremiah tells of this same dilemma. In chapter 25 Jeremiah had prophesied that Judah would be in exile for 70 years. He even used a visual aid for this by getting them to place a yoke normally used on an ox on his neck to show how King Nebuchadnezzar would place a yoke on the nation of Judah. Then in chapter 28:1-4 along comes Hananiah who delivered publicly, solemnly, in the house of the Lord, and in the name of the Lord, a prediction that the king of Babylon's power over Judah and Jerusalem, would be speedily

broken, that within two years the vessels of the temple would be brought back, and all the captives would return. What our lesson this morning is, is Jeremiah's response to this false prophesy.

Jeremiah truly wished that this prophesy might be true. He loved his country, and so really wanted it to be true to the extent that he would be content to acknowledge his prophesy as being wrong so that the ruin of the nation might be prevented. So he says, 'Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil the words that you have prophesied...' But he knew in his heart of hearts that this is a false prophesy.

I don't know about you but I didn't spot it as being false. One commentator says confidently that it lacked piety to be true. I think it is the commentator being wise after the event because Hananiah's prediction sounded reasonable at the time because Nebuchadnezzar was occupied in battle against Egypt and thus could pay little attention to his vassal-state of Judah. Rumours spread that Babylon was weakening, and even Jeremiah seems to have wanted to believe Judah would be safe. Jeremiah was no sadist who wanted his fellow countrymen to suffer. However, Jeremiah was a man of God and knew he could not judge truth by what he wanted but by the Word of God. Hananiah's message did not stand in continuity with earlier prophets who preached the whole counsel of the Lord and prophesied disaster for the impenitent covenant people. Therefore, it was to be rejected.

Now, we all know the hard time that Jeremiah had from the people and he has become part of the English language when we refer to a pessimistic person as being 'a real Jeremiah.' Is this what Matthew is warning his church about? Jesus tells them to "welcome" those bringing the Good News, and to welcome someone was to show hospitality in the ancient sense: of providing food, shelter, and a place to rest. In semi-arid Palestine area, giving a cup of cold (refreshing) water was a vivid image of hospitality. The "reward," for this of course, is being included in the Kingdom of God. And this is the reward that Jesus was speaking about when he said: *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.*

Remember, this is part of the training in Matthew Church in making missionaries to obey the Great Commission. Missionaries in those days typically carried few supplies. They depended on the hospitality of those to whom they went. It wasn't viewed as freeloading but faithfully trusting in God to supply their needs.

Thus this Gospel passage has a double message – firstly to those who welcome the witnesses of the Matthew community, the hosts and hostesses if you like, they will share in the coming Kingdom. Jesus says "none of these will lose their reward". Secondly, it assures the missionaries themselves that God will also provide hospitality for them. They can witness boldly because people will welcome them.

So, on Trinity Sunday we heard the Great Commission. How are we as a congregation witnessing to our community? How are we welcoming those who are witnessing? Can we as a congregation enter into partnership to enhance the witness to the Kingdom? If so, with whom? Well, in August our Archdeaconry is doing a Pulpit-swap – priests from other parishes will be coming to St Paul's to speak about Compassion towards – the elderly, the poor, children at risk and women. Will you be willing to hear what they have to say? Perhaps with fresh ears, because their preaching styles will be different from mine. Perhaps then we can explore to whom we might give a "cup of cold water?" that is, who can we enter into partnership with for the enlarging the Kingdom of God? Yes, as we share the Good News as commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission, we must see ourselves as prophets called by God.