

Epiphany 2 – Prophecy (2)

(Isaiah 49:1-7 page 736; John 1:29-42 page 1063)

Last week, we read the first Servant Song from Isaiah, and looked at Jesus' Baptism by John the Baptist. This week we have Episode 2; we've just heard read the second of Isaiah's four Servant Songs, and heard the story unfold following Jesus' Baptism. These readings make it difficult to ignore the role of prophecy as a fundamentally important means by which God communicates to us.

Last week, Barbara McDonald raised the question of our response to God's prophecies. She observed that God chose to reveal his Son to those already gathering for baptism; those with hearts already open and seeking a closer walk with God. Barbara also pointed out those religious leaders on the periphery of the crowd, checking up, going back to report, and plotting to undermine Jesus ministry – the blind leading the blind as it were. Closely associated with prophecy is recognition – our ability to recognise God at work among us – either in the person of Jesus or in prophetic words spoken through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So what is prophecy all about, and is it important in the church today?

The first Servant Song ends with the statement – clearly in God's own words – “New things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you!”

Clearly, one of the roles of prophecy is foretelling what will happen, this is different from predicting, it is declaring. It is declaring what God has already decided to do. This declaration demonstrates the sovereignty of God himself, and authenticates the gift of prophecy in the speaker.

I remember one occasion about eight years ago, when an older friend of ours asked us to coffee, explained he had been diagnosed with cancer, and asked us to pray for him. We started our prayer with a time of listening to God. Both Barbara and I visualised beautiful, positive summer scenes. This couple had been disappointed at having had no grandchildren. On hearing Barbara describe a very similar picture to mine, I simply said to our friend that we did not need to pray for healing, because it was already a done deal; and that God had a whole new and joyful episode in life awaiting my friend and his wife. The chemo-therapy was successful. Today my friend is cancer-free and has four grandchildren, including twins. It is an example of foretelling what God has already planned to do.

The four Servant Songs in Isaiah have an additional purpose. They certainly foretell the coming of The Servant of the Lord some 700 years before Jesus was born, and so authenticate Isaiah as a prophet of God; they also describe the character and ministry of The Servant.

The Servant was utterly different to the expectations that people had of a Messiah. They thought of a conquering hero, a king who would overturn the Roman occupation, and liberate God's people once more. A kind of Moses figure if you like. But Isaiah's Servant Songs paint a different picture as the Servant cries out “I have laboured in vain; I have spent

my strength for nothing at all.” This reminds me of the words of Jesus on the cross as he was about to die “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In those words, did Jesus experience failure? Or again in Isaiah we read “to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation”, such was the curse felt by dying a criminal’s death at the hands of both Jewish and Roman authorities.

The Servant Songs allow us to look at any of the self-proclaimed messiahs and ask “Does his life reflect God’s foretelling of his Servant, or not?” The answer has always been “No!”, until we come to the life of Jesus, when the answer is a resounding “Yes!”. Because of the Servant Songs, and other prophecies, we can be absolutely confident that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of God. Isaiah’s prophecy authenticates Jesus himself. When John questioned Jesus messiahship from prison, Jesus told his disciples to tell John what they saw of Jesus ministry, and quoted Isaiah’s prophecy to authenticate his own identity.

It also means that we can have confidence in those parts of Isaiah’s prophecy which refer to a further future. God’s promise to his Servant states: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.” This did not happen in Jesus’ own ministry on earth, but has clearly happened over the subsequent 2000 years.

Or again “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy one of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Some day, Jesus will be acknowledged as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. We can be sure because God revealed this through Isaiah his prophet.

Sadly, Isaiah did not live to see his prophecy fulfilled. He probably did not understand what God’s words meant. It is not necessarily the role of the prophet to understand or interpret the words he has been given to speak. The role is to declare them!

In our previous church there were a small number of people who clearly had a prophetic gifting. Occasionally one of them would come to the service leader with a scribbled piece of paper – words that they believed the congregation should hear. The service leader would then discern whether to speak out these words in the service, and to my memory always did. On one occasion the piece of paper had just one word on it, that had no apparent meaning or significance. The word was ‘cobbles’. But for one member of our fellowship, that word had profound significance, and declaring it at that moment set that person’s life in a new direction. Faithfulness is a key aspect of the prophetic ministry. You’ll have gathered by now, that by ‘prophetic ministry’ I tend to include the gifts of words of wisdom and knowledge, and the gift of discernment, as well as the gift of prophecy.

John the Baptist was also a prophet – Jesus said so! He also prophesied in the sense of foretelling: ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ Again quite a cryptic statement until you realise just who Jesus is. I wonder if John understood it himself before Jesus own baptism, and those words from Heaven “You are my Son, who I love, with you I am well pleased.” Jesus was indeed born some six months after

John, he started his ministry after John, but as God's own Son, Jesus origins come way before John's, and so he surpasses John!

It is not John's foretelling that I want to focus on, but another aspect of prophecy, also strong in all the Old Testament prophets including Isaiah. It is not foretelling, but forth-telling. Speaking God's word into the current situation.

Before Jesus baptism, John's ministry was to call people to repentance; the means by which he prepared the way for the coming Messiah. He spoke into the broken and corrupt lifestyle of the times, and called people to step out of that, to be baptised and start afresh on a new path. By far the majority of prophecy in the Bible is forth-telling rather than foretelling.

In this passage from John's gospel, we see the powerful combination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in John's ministry. The prophetic gifts of discernment, knowledge and declaration come together in John's witness statement: "I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water (that's God!) told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

John had to discern that the special knowledge he had received was from God, he had to discern that the message was about Jesus – well he had a pretty big clue – and then he had to declare – to forth-tell that "This is God's Chosen One." It is John's faithfulness in his calling that brought the first two disciples to Jesus.

From this point on things started to move pretty fast. Andrew fetched his brother Simon Peter with the words "We have found the Messiah", and the very next day Jesus called Phillip, who went to fetch Nathanael. No one had to explain or justify that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. A few moments, a few words with Jesus, and they knew.

The gift of discernment rests not only in the speaker but also in the listener. What makes prophecy compelling is when those who hear it know it to be genuinely God speaking into their situation.

In South Africa, on holiday, Barbara and I went to a small church, where there happened to be a visiting prayer ministry team. Barbara was moved to go to Erica for prayer. Before she could explain why she was coming for prayer, Erica declared "You do not need to worry about your daughters, they are in God's hand." This was as you can imagine of great comfort to us both.

Maybe 15 years ago, I had been preaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, by using the analogy of an oil painting – the canvas was the area of ministry, the different coloured oils were the gifts, the painter was the Holy Spirit and the final result the work of God.

Two weeks later, I was at a national conference for Lay Readers in north Wales. At the end of the conference, after a service of Holy Communion, we were offered the opportunity to be anointed for ministry. There were four queues, two down the centre aisle, one down each side aisle. I was in the south aisle. Each had three people administering the anointing. As I approached, I wondered which of the three would come free for me. When I got to the

front all three became free at the same time. I chose a lady minister. She anointed my head for my ministry as a lay reader. Then she asked – ‘may I anoint your hands as well?’ Of course I said yes! As she anointed my hands, she prayed that “The Holy Spirit would paint on the canvas of my life in such vivid colours that...” I was so overwhelmed I didn’t remember the rest ... except that she anointed my hands for the ministry of healing. Her spoken words authenticated her anointing – I had to take that seriously no matter how scary the calling.

We are all given the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that the witness of our lives is authenticated as the Holy Spirit works in and through us.

How can we bring people to Jesus unless the Holy Spirit is at work in us? God has equipped us to do so. In Ephesians, and elsewhere, Paul makes clear Joel’s prophecy, that God would pour out his gifts on all mankind, is now fulfilled in the church, the body of Christ. That since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been available to every believer. Indeed, John declared that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit. Paul emphasises that each one of us has been gifted by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of building up the church “as each one does his or her part”.

I have no doubt that the prophetic gifts of discernment, of words of knowledge and wisdom, and of prophecy remain a part of Jesus’ gifting to his church today. How else would God communicate with us?

If we are to build up Christ’s body in Bookham, then we will need to help each other to discern the gifts we have been given; and encourage one another to use those gifts faithfully in Jesus service. Without the Holy Spirit at work in and through us, our whole Church Development Plan is futile. “Unless God builds the house, the builders build in vain.”

Over the coming few weeks we have the opportunity to consider how we might help build up Jesus church here through our worship life. I notice that one option on the sheet is “Other” and wonder how many of us might put the word “prophecy” there! It’s certainly an exciting calling.

Let’s reflect on how God might be calling each one of us to use the gifts he has so generously given us.

Amen