

## PROPHECY

29<sup>th</sup> November 2020

I wonder if you have ever been the object of a prophecy. If so, how did you feel? It only happened to me once and it was at the same time reassuring and unsettling, reassuring because I did in fact feel it was a message – or a reminder – from God, but unsettling because such a message demands a response. I imagine much of what the prophets of the Old Testament said must have had the same effect on their hearers. They might be glad to know that God was still speaking, but they may not always have liked what he had to say.

We generally think of prophecy as predictions regarding the future and the end-times ... and some of them are ... but a more accurate definition would be special messages from God, often uttered through human spokesmen, indicating the divine will for mankind. The prophets did not speak on their own behalf, but rather they passed on the truth that God gave them. That truth sometimes came directly from God himself or from an angel (= God's messenger) as when Gabriel told Mary she was to give birth to Jesus. But sometimes the prophecy came through visions (like Ezekiel) or dreams (like Daniel). Of course, we have to be careful with dreams and visions because they may or may not come from God. Nevertheless, God does speak and we need to be alert to the possibility that we might hear directly from him, as well as through our reading of His word or even through other people.

There are over 300 prophetic words in the O.T. regarding aspects of Jesus' life and death, including 8 in Zechariah alone. All the major prophets spoke of some aspect of Messiah's life, as did 5 of those we call the minor prophets, but at this time of year we generally concentrate on those verses that speak of his birth, for obvious reasons.

Malachi 3:1 speaks of the messenger who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. The identity of this messenger is a subject for debate and conjecture, but Malachi continues in 3:5 *See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes*. Christians usually see the messenger as referring to John the Baptist. God's angel suggested this when he told Zechariah that John would have the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). His work was to call the people to repent and to prepare them morally and spiritually for the coming of Messiah.

Micah 5:2 is the verse that indicates that Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. That was where David was anointed as king and it's also the setting for much of the story of Ruth. Although it was a comparatively insignificant place politically and geographically, it had a significant place in the religious history of the Jews. God uses the small and the weak of the world to accomplish his mighty purposes. That should encourage us!

While the town may be humble, the ruler who is prophesied to come from there will be unique, for the Lord says he will come *for me*, that is *on my behalf*. He will serve God, not himself. Not only that, but he will be someone *whose origins are from old, from ancient times*. We usually count people's existence from the moment of their birth – or at the very most, their conception – but this wasn't true of the Messiah. As a human being, he was born in a specific place, but as God he had no beginning that could be put on a calendar.

The other prophecy that we regularly read at this time of the year is that in the first 7 verses of Isaiah 9. They begin with a claim that God is capable of changing people's circumstances. Those who were in darkness, living in Galilee, the border area that would be the first to be invaded by the Assyrians, they would be the first to enjoy honour as the shadow of death gave way to the light. This light would be the source of fruitfulness, of joy and abundance, as verse 3 suggests.

This turnaround in the situation is due to the birth of a child who is called to reign. He is Immanuel, God with us, God's gift to humanity's predicament, the one who had been announced in 7:14: *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel*. How much we need that reassurance today that God is with us. The child's human attributes of wisdom, peace, uprightness and justice are combined with divine qualities that only God possesses, which is why he is hailed as *the Mighty God* and *the everlasting Father*. No wonder this passage is seen as referring to Messiah.

There are therefore at least two messages that we need to hear from these prophecies:

- However dark the world may seem at present, we can be reassured that God is with us.
- Secondly, he can change our circumstances. I wonder if we really believe that. Are we praying, for example, for an end to this

pandemic? Are we praying specifically, as Sue Saunders challenged us a few weeks ago, for a new minister?

Are there still prophets in our midst? Some claim that the last prophets were in N.T. times. Personally, I find no proof in Scripture that the spiritual gifts, which include prophecy, are not still given to Christians, as God wills. If that is true, maybe we need also to consider the possibility that God may want to speak through us. Remember, we are not speaking on our own behalf, but on God's behalf. We should only speak if we feel compelled by him to do so. The Old Testament prophets were called by him for particular purposes, but most of these are really needed by our generation too.

- First of all, they were charged with calling people back to God. In an age when He is largely ignored, we need to remind people, even if we are laughed at, that he is real and wants a relationship with each one of us.
- Secondly, the prophets were called to remind their people to act justly. At a time when there is so much selfishness and injustice in the world, this is also a message that needs to be heard.
- Thirdly, the prophets were called to remind people that there would eventually be judgement, both affecting them and the other nations.
- Fourthly, the prophets were not known for their diplomacy. They sometimes called their fellow-citizens rude names; they were outrageous and outspoken. I'm not suggesting that we should imitate Donald Trump, but God is passionate about his people, and his prophets therefore should reflect his anger and his passion.
- Finally, the prophets pointed to Jesus, who would usher in God's reign of peace, justice, mercy, compassion, safety, shelter and love.

As we begin our preparations for Christmas, then, as we look forward to celebrating the coming of our Saviour, let's take any opportunities we are given to speak out as the prophets did and to share those reassurances that God is with his people and can transform individual lives as well as the life of the nation.