

GROWING Together

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HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD

Prophetic Voices for God

“Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel: for the Lord has a dispute with the inhabitants of the land.” Hosea 4:1

Watching a society rife with greed and injustice 2700 years ago, the prophet Hosea warns the people of Israel that divine judgment is imminent unless drastic changes are made. The people pay no attention and Israel is overthrown by the Assyrians.

We often assume that the work of the prophet is to predict the future, and there are certainly passages in scripture where this seems to be the case. But the prophet’s responsibility is to deliver God’s message for the present time, while warning of future consequences if the people do not hear. Sometimes the message is one of hope and deliverance; at other times it is divine judgement.

Often quoted, especially at Christmas time, are verses from the seventh chapter of Isaiah, a message of hope for the king of Judah and a promise for all people in the years to come. The prophet speaks to King Ahaz and, pointing to a young woman, remarks, “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a child”. Isaiah seems to be saying that by the time her child is born and weaned (a period of about three years), Judah’s principal enemies will have ceased to be a threat. That did come to pass, yet many Christians interpret the words “young woman” to mean “virgin” and see this passage a prediction that one day a virgin would give birth to a child, Immanuel, God with us: Jesus, born of a virgin mother in Bethlehem.



Similarly, the songs of the suffering servant in Isaiah are seen by many Jewish readers as referring to the community as a whole and not to one individual. The same passages are considered by Christians on Good Friday to be direct prophecies of the events surrounding the suffering of Jesus. Many Christians are drawn to passages in the Book of Revelation and some have identified its names, numbers, people and places with current events. While there is much in such writing to inspire us in our devotional life, it is a mistake to see every verse as if it were a prediction of coming events. The principal task of the prophet, in ancient times as well as in our own day, is to address the present, having heard God’s word.

Today, many prophets speak God’s word to our generation, as did John-Paul II and others, like Billy Graham or Desmond Tutu. Some have challenged society’s ills, as did Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., prophets who led the drive for civil rights in the United States. Others, like the author Rachel Carson and animal conservationist Jane Goodall, have addressed the fragile state of our environment and the constant threat to God’s creatures. Still more, like Romeo D’Allaire, are committed to the struggle for peace in our troubled, and frequently violent, world. Jean Vanier reminds us of God’s love for every woman, man and child regardless of mental ability. Passionate calls for action come to us from Stephen Lewis and others seeking to combat HIV-AIDS, especially in Africa.

Many today would claim to be prophets and there will always be false prophets around us. We are called to discern among the voices we hear, to pray for guidance and to remember that the voice of God has been proclaimed and heard in every age from ancient times to ours today. Some prophets are named in scripture; others speak from our own generation. “Hear the word of the Lord” said Hosea 2700 years ago. What was spoken then, and what faithful women and men speak today, must awaken our consciences and challenge us to respond.

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Prairie Centre for Ecumenism
600 - 45th Street West
Saskatoon, SK S7L 5W9
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phone: (306)-653-1633
fax: (306) 653-1821
email: pce@ecumenism.net
www.ecumenism.net