

Prophecy as Protest

Speaking truth to power

JUST-RIGHT SPIRIT

Righteousness and justice

‘ ... put a right spirit within me.
(Ps 51:10)

We have already seen that the primary evidence of a truly spiritual person is in their behaviour and actions:

‘By their fruits you will know them’

(Matt 7:16)

Truly spiritual people make an impact in their environment:

‘The wind blows where it wills and you hear its sound’
(Jn 3:8)

We have clearly seen that the spiritual person begins by being ‘righteous’ (being upright within themselves), but that of necessity demands that they work for ‘justice’ (putting everything right within society). It is fascinating that there is just a single Greek word in the New Testament for both ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ – *dikaiosune*. Integrity of character and social action are inseparable realities in a New Testament understanding of spirituality:

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness / justice’
(Matt 5:6)

Two groups of people for whom beliefs demand to be put into action are ‘prophets’ and ‘activists’. Are they one and the same? What energizes them? What can they teach us about authentic spirituality?

Exercise 1: Prophets and Activists

To help us engage with the ideas of both ‘prophets’ and ‘activists’, working in small groups, we shall discuss the following questions:

- How do you understand the term ‘prophet’?
- Name four people to whom you think the title can properly be applied (two from within the biblical text and two from more recent times)?
- How do you understand the term ‘activist’?
- Name four people to whom you think the title can properly be applied (two from within the biblical text and two from more recent times)?
- What do they all have in common?
- What do you think might distinguish ‘prophets’ from ‘activists’?



TRUTH WORK

Spirituality of protest

The ideas of both a 'prophet' and 'activist' are clearly legitimate biblical and spiritual terms. Acted prophecy is a time-honoured means of powerful communication to bring about significant personal and social change:

- **A true prophet** is someone who proclaims and *forthtells* the character of God, not someone who *foretells* the future. The true prophet also seeks to incarnate God's character so that their actions and lifestyle give power and integrity to the message they bring.
- **A true activist** is someone who works for radical change in this world, *now*. They work tirelessly to bring into reality what they believe things should be. They act humbly and sensitively, but are prepared to pay the price personally for overturning the existing order.
- **An acted prophecy** is a public demonstration of truth with memorable and disturbing impact.¹ Remember that a biblical understanding of truth is to do with character, not simply correct information. It confronts people dramatically with how God wants them to be.

All true prophets are activists, all true activists are prophets; these are two inseparable dimensions of a single calling. The Christian community of faith is to be a company of 'prophet-activists', living and moving in the power of the Spirit, taking people by surprise, provoking them to think and maybe change their minds; calling for 'metanoia' – repentance – 'to think differently'. We are to proclaim *shalom* and pray for peace. This is the gospel and evangelism. We cannot keep silent we must speak and act.

Holistic activism

The 'prophet-activist' works with a holistic understanding. Everything is driven by the *shalom* vision of the total integration and harmony of everything within a spirituality that harmonizes with the character of God. It flows through three interconnected areas:²

- **Personal:** everything must flow for an inner wholeness of character; there is the need for nurturing spirituality
- **Social:** everything must flow from interpersonal relationships; there is the need for engaged community

¹ There are numerous biblical examples of acted prophecy, with people like Ahijah (1Kg 11:29-39) Hosea (1:3-8), Isaiah (8:1-3; 20:1-6) and Ezekiel (4:1-3; 12:1-16; 24:15-24 and others) as prime examples

² This is developed in much more detail in R Foster '**Streams of Living Water**' Harper Collins 1998 p 172-176



- **Structural:** everything must flow from justice in organization: there is the need for activist prophecy

‘The gospel is a stick of dynamite in the social structure’³

Words and actions

In Jeremiah 19 (v11-15) the prophet stands in the ‘valley of Hinnom’ (Heb: *ge hinnom*), Jerusalem’s rubbish tip; the place where in the days of Hezekiah and Josiah false gods were destroyed and the place-name from which the word ‘hell’ is derived – the ultimate destruction of all evil. Jeremiah proclaims that God hates what they are doing and will obliterate their works. Holding a clay jar aloft he smashes it. Taking the shattered shards in his hands, he makes it clear that God has spoken, like the broken jar nothing can now be the same, Yahweh will fulfil his words.

Exercise 2: Reading the texts, telling the story

To help us engage with ‘spiritual activism’ and the nature of acted prophecy, in small groups, we shall look at the account of Jesus cleansing the temple:

- First, listen to a composite re-telling of the story, based on Matthew’s account with additions taken from the gospels of Mark and John;
- Then read the passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah;
- Finally, work through the questions together.

Cleansing the Temple⁴

‘Then Jesus entered the temple and *found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords he drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, (as well as) the sheep and the cattle, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He told them, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”*⁵ *His disciples remembered it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*⁶ (Jesus) said to them, “It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer;⁷
but you have made it a den of *insurrectionists*’⁸

³ This phrase is attributed to Donald Bloesch, see ‘**Streams of Living Water**’ p176 footnote 74

⁴ Matt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-19; Jn 2:13-22

⁵ Zec 6:12-13

⁶ Ps 69:9

⁷ Isa 56:7

⁸ Jer 7:11



'The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David", they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes, have you never read,

'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise for yourself?'"⁹

'The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." (They said), "This temple has been under construction for forty six years and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

'They kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spell bound by his teaching. He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.'

Isaiah 56:3-8

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."
For thus says the Lord:
To eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
Who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters:
I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.
And the foreigners that join themselves to the Lord,
To minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it,
and hold fast to my covenant –
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

⁹ Ps 8:2 (LXX)



Jeremiah 7:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:
Stand in the gate of the Lord's house,
and proclaim there this word, and say,
Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to
worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your
ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in
these deceptive words:
"This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,
the temple of the Lord."
For if you truly amend your ways and your doings,
if you truly act justly one with another,
if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow,
or shed innocent blood in this place,
in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.
Here you are, trusting in deceptive words of no avail.
Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,
make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,
and then come and stand before me in this house,
which is called by my name,
and say, "We are safe!" –
only to go on doing all these abominations?
Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of *insurrectionists* in
your sight?
You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Questions:

- What things strike you about this story of Jesus?
- How do the Isaiah and Jeremiah passages relate to the story?
- What does this story tell us about Jesus' spirituality?
- What does this story tell us about acted prophecy?
- What aspects of a Christian understanding of spirituality does this story help us to develop?

SPIRIT ZEALOT

Jesus cleanses the Temple

There are at least six things we can learn from Jesus about acted prophecy in this story:

1. Jesus chooses everything with care.

This is the culmination of his entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1-11)¹⁰; he is staking his claim as Messiah at the very hub of the nation. 'He planned for prime-time and

¹⁰ We recognize that in John's gospel this story is placed early in Jesus' public ministry; whether this is done as a literary technique or for other reasons is uncertain and much debated



maximum exposure, a demonstration calculated to interrupt business as usual and bring the imminence of God's reign abruptly, forcefully, to the attention of all ...It was at once a demonstration, a prophetic act, a fulfilment event and a sign of the future'¹¹ This was a calculated act, choosing the place and time with care, this was not a spur-of-the-moment response.

'Prophetic-activism' should be the result of careful thought, prayer and organisation. The place needs to be significant and the timing exactly right. Minds are focused and questioning. It needs to be a *kairos* moment, a day of opportunity, when you can expect things to happen!

2. Jesus is very angry.

What Jesus sees happening in the temple enrages him; he sees the religious/political hierarchy of the day involved in spiritual and social corruption that must not and cannot go unchallenged. He will not be silent he will not be restrained! In that moment, every word, action and fibre of Jesus' being communicated vehement passion against the perverting injustices of the power system displayed in the temple. In the words of Psalm 69:9, 'Zeal for God's house consumed him'.

Are you angry? I'm angry. Christians simply don't get angry enough. Anger is no sin, though like everything else it can be perverted. Anger, as a voice for truth and justice, is an essential and mature expression of righteousness. We should be angry about violence, corruption, injustice, abuse and very much more. Aren't you angry? We should be passionate believers in the 'wrath of God'; not in the old traditional 'hell fire and brimstone' sense, but in the true biblical sense of God's outrage against the way evil has perverted creation. But a wrath that has at its epicentre incredible love and compassion for every living thing, fury that will rescue, save and put right. Like Jesus the wrath of God is 'wild but it is good'.¹²

3. Jesus displays assertive meekness.

As a long-time pacifist and '*shalom* activist' I cannot recall how many times people have thrown this story at me as 'proof' that Jesus was not committed to non-violence. They are simply wrong! Yes, Jesus is angry, he drives the traders and animals out, he overturns tables, *but* he violates nobody. For me, the words 'pacifist' and 'non-violent' are inadequate; the phrase 'assertive meekness' is closer to the biblical idea. 'Meekness' is not 'weakness' but 'strength under perfect control', like a war-horse guided by bit and bridle. Jesus is angry, but with perfect self-control. He creates a storm in which he is the central calm. He throws over tables and brandishes a whip *but* harms no one, other than the pride and greed of traders. Here we see rage and restraint in incredible balance, a fine but clear line. Everything about this story reinforces the New Testament message that there are 'no circumstances in which a Christian is ever justified in using

¹¹ BF Mayer '*The Aims of Jesus*' SCM 1979 p 197

¹² Adapted from CS Lewis' comment about Aslan in the words of Mr Beaver in '*The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe*' Penguin Books 1959

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr Beaver "...Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he is good..." (p 75) "He's wild you know. Not like a *tame* lion." (p 166)

violence.’ Today, and everyday, let us make the gentleness of assertive meekness the hallmark of our protest, prophecy and lifestyle.

4. Jesus focuses their attention on truth.

Everyone who saw and heard Jesus on that day could not have mistaken his message. He loudly proclaims two scriptures (that you have reflected on above):

- **Isaiah 56:7** *‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’*. Words from a beautiful prophecy¹³ that looks to a day when foreigners, eunuchs and outcasts will be part of an inclusive prayerful temple community from which they are all now excluded.
- **Jeremiah 7:11** *‘... but you have made it a den of insurrectionists’*. Words from a challenging sermon¹⁴ at the gates of the temple to the leaders and the nation who believed that ‘the temple of the Lord’ would protect them; Jeremiah makes it clear that God says otherwise.

Today we want to capture people’s attention and focus it on truth. God wants to embrace the people of the earth as a prayerful community of peace and just relationships who share resources and include the poor and outcast. So much opposes that vision.

For example, issues like the arms trade, not only divert resources from the needy but also actively destroy communities with its many forms of violence. Today people look to armaments for protection as they looked to the temple in Jeremiah’s day, in both cases mistakenly; leaders displaying an attitude of ‘insurrection’ and rebellion towards moral principles and how God wants things to be.

5. Jesus provokes a response.

The reaction to Jesus’ acted prophecy is remarkable:

- **Animals are liberated:** Cattle, sheep and doves are saved from the sacrificial slaughter-house; this is what happens as the new creation breaks in – where not only will there be no more sacrifice, but also when all people and animals will not only be vegetarian, but in fact vegan!
- **Blind and lame healed:** They were normally excluded and these are the only healings of Jesus recorded as taking place in the temple, so they must be significant.
- **Children recognise him:** The young and innocent understand what the leaders fail to grasp, Jesus quotes from Psalm 8:2 (LXX version).
- **People are spellbound:** Jesus’ action has captured the crowd’s attention and now they are listening with rapt attention.
- **Leaders want to kill him:** This was nothing new and it would soon happen. Jesus died because he challenged the politics of his day. Acted prophecy

¹³ For the full text read Isaiah 56:3-8

¹⁴ For the full text read Jeremiah 7:1-11



that touches power, security, injustice and greed will always face a backlash.

Every prophetic-activist action holds the possibility of both unexpected miracles and hostility; both should be anticipated!

6. Jesus points to the future.

Jesus is asked for a 'sign' as a basis for his authority for cleansing the temple, and he provocatively points to himself. "Destroy *this* temple" (the other will be a heap of rubble by 70CE). "I will raise it up." His authority was in who he was, the Messiah, and in what he would accomplish, the resurrection with the inauguration of the new heaven and the new earth.

Our authority for prophetic action is built upon this same foundation. We are disciples of Jesus the Messiah. We are children of the resurrection, living stones that make up a new temple of which Jesus is the cornerstone. We are the first fruits of the new creation; the whole cosmos liberated by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Citizens of a city that has and needs no temple for God's presence permeates the whole. A place where swords have been beaten into ploughshares and war is studied no more.

This is both our authority and our message.

SPIRIT DRIVEN

'And the Spirit immediately drove (Jesus) into the wilderness.'
(Mk 1:12)

The key word in this verse is 'driven'; in Greek it is *ekballo*, a very strong and powerful word. It is the word used by John's gospel for cleansing the Temple. It is the word used throughout the gospels for exorcisms.

The Spirit, drives the spiritual person, to live and act dynamically, like the wind blowing. The spiritual person themselves will drive to establish justice and truth, and work to put everything right – within themselves, society and creation.

'It is Jesus we proclaim,
warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom,
so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.
For this I toil and struggle
with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me'
(Col 1:28-29)

Questions

1. Many passionate activists come from other faith traditions, or would identify themselves humanist or atheist. Can they also be prophets?
2. Would you expect there to be a distinguishing 'spirituality' in a Christian activist, in contrast to someone from another faith or belief tradition? What are the reasons for your answer?



3. What are the dangers of having a spirituality that has little or no activist expression? What are the dangers of having an activism that is dislocated from spirituality? What is required to hold the two dimensions in a dynamic and creative tension?

Reading & Resources

R Foster '*Streams of Living Water*' Harper Collins 1998

DB Kraybill '*The Upside-down Kingdom*' Marshalls 1985

N Moules '*Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace*' Circle Books 2012

Ched Myers & Elaine Enns '*Ambassadors of Reconciliation*' (Vol1&2) Orbis 2009

J Wallis '*The Call to Conversion*' Lion 1981

JH Yoder '*The Politics of Jesus*' Eerdmans 1972

