

## The Prophet

(From the Propers for Advent III, Book of Common Prayer pps. 93-94)

### The Collect

*O LORD Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.*

*From The Epistle. 1 Cor. iv. 1.*

*LET a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

*From The Gospel. St. Matt. xi. 2.*

*And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.*

A quick glance at today's Collect, Epistle, and Gospel will reveal a theme common to all: the role of the prophet. The wording in the Collect —*ministers and stewards of thy mysteries*— is derived from St. Paul's comments to the Corinthians in our Epistle: *Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.* The Collect is focusing especially upon the duties and calling of those whom God has set in that critical position of proclaiming His truth: the preachers. The timeliness of these admonitions also ties in with the Ember Days (Book of Common Prayer, pp. 260-261) which occur four times a year in the Church calendar, as they will this week. Ordinations to the ministry have traditionally been scheduled for these days.

Today's Gospel focuses on the prophet John. The Lord, in giving due honor to John, describes graphically the nature of John's life and calling. He was no *reed shaken by the wind*, one who caved in to the whims of the age, who set himself to fill his listeners with empty comfort and assurances, who never would have dared to disturb things. The seriousness of his mission also deprived him of an easy life. He was not *a man clothed in soft raiment*. No, he was *a prophet, yea, and more than a prophet.*

The word *prophet* in the Greek means "one who speaks forth". Thayer's Lexicon notes that this may signify "an interpreter or spokesman for God; one through whom God speaks". It also denotes "one who, moved by the Spirit of God and hence his organ or spokesman, solemnly declares to men what he has received by inspiration, especially future events, and in particular such as relate to the cause and kingdom of God and to human salvation". Thayer continues: "...

[the prophet] is a man who by God's authority and command in words of weight pleads the cause of God and urges the salvation of men" (p. 553).

This divine appointment is not one whit less significant in the times in which we live today. The Church is greatly in need of those who can accurately, honestly, and compassionately speak forth for God. If this ministry is not active within the Church, the Church itself cannot fulfill its own mission as a witness to the truth within the world. Yes, the Church itself is called to this prophetic role in the wider community. What, if not this very fact, is the meaning of Jesus' words to His followers that are recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 13-16)?:

*Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

What, then, are the requirements imposed upon one who is commissioned to this task? I would like to suggest the following: 1. the prophet must *know* the truth, —i.e., what God is wishing to communicate— in order to be able to proclaim it; 2. the prophet must possess the courage and determination to deliver it; and 3. he must be invested with the necessary graces that will certify his position as prophet, so that his message will be received for what it is... the voice of God.

First, he must know the truth. This knowledge is two-fold, because it means knowing the Scriptures, and also being prayerfully informed about the times and the spirit of the age so that he can speak directly into it as God's spokesman. He must keep his ear continually to the ground of life, listening for those signs of change that indicate the direction that men's hearts, passions, and preoccupations are taking them. Knowing these things, sensing them, and being able to distill them clearly in his own thinking, he is then in a position to apply God's eternal Word to them. To the extent that his spiritual hearing is impaired because he is himself immersed and involved in the world, and not attuned to Scripture, to that extent he will fail and fall short. To the extent that he disciplines himself to maintain an unclouded vision regarding a whole host of telltale subtleties underway around him — which is certainly the case today — to that extent he will occupy the incredibly vital but very difficult position of the prophet.

Knowing the truth, he must set his heart to deliver it, the second requirement. We all know that this task is becoming much harder. Gone are the days when the general public as a matter of habit would give at least some degree of an affirmative nod toward religious principle and belief. Within that atmosphere, now a thing of the past, there was a certain freedom to hold Gospel crusades, to publish religious newspaper columns, and to anticipate that acknowledging God and church would be a regular part of civic life. But the favorable winds that blew support-

ively at the church's back have now turned to strongly oppose it head-on. It is fair to quote Jesus' portentous words regarding our times: *And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold* (Matthew 24:12). The last thing that those in disobedience and rebellion against God want to hear is godly reproof. The Old Testament prophets were wildly unpopular in their day. King Herod imprisoned John the Baptist, who upbraided the king for his immorality. Our Lord Himself, the greatest prophet of all, received the full brunt of the kind of hatred that is aroused by those whose very existence depends upon a foolproof ruse of self-righteousness. Today, much of "polite society" — the well-situated, the influential, the intellectual — has abandoned the practice of religion with a great and happy sigh of relief, and given itself wholeheartedly to the embracing of values and practices and a rewritten moral code that it fiercely and determinedly defends. To call them to task is to invite trouble. It is especially precarious to do so because the church generally is so weak. A prophet needs backup, because he will take on the chin the full heat of opposition. These are truly challenging times for those who would tell forth the truth.

For these reasons, the prophet must be outfitted by God and by the Church with the necessary graces to discharge his mission, which is our third qualification. Quoting Paul, who himself is referencing Isaiah 52: *And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!* (Romans 10:15). An unbalanced prophet will bring an unbalanced message, and in these days when our faith is so skillfully opposed, it must be even more skillfully presented. The manner, method, and message of the proclaimer of truth must be so intrinsically pure and unimpeachable, that the responsibility for its rejection and dismissal will rest solely with the hearers, and not upon the carelessness and lack of preparation or the unchristian attitude of the one delivering it. It is a great victory for the enemies of God to condemn, with clear justification, those who openly disqualify themselves by their behavior from presuming to represent Him. And there is clearly much of this today. The prophet must remain a prophet. He cannot become a partisan, entering the ring of the opinions of men to champion this side or that. He is not a combatant for any cause except God's, and even then, his combat is of a different nature:

*For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God... (2 Cor. 10:3-5)*

In short, the prophet can never allow himself to become a tool for any human agenda, even an apparently righteous one. Guided by God, he picks his battles very carefully, looking for those fronts where the truth of God is most directly under attack.

It is my conviction that among the foremost of those embattled truths is the place, function, and nature of the Church. Listen to St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy:

*These things write I unto thee, ... that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (3:14b, 15)*

*The pillar and ground of the truth!* If the pillar is shaky or crumbling, how will the truth stand? Can it stand by itself? If the truth possesses no solid *ground* under it to support it, will it survive the wave of assaults that men and devils, emboldened by a lawless age, aim against it?

Let's return once more to the words of today's Collect:

*O LORD Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight...*

Both the preacher and the Church have been given this mission. Like John the Baptist, we are, in our times, *to prepare and make ready* the way of the Lord.

We can no longer be content with just going to church. We must *be* the Church.

And *being* the Church now means far more than any of us had ever guessed...

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*