

# NOURISHING THE PROPHET

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**W**HEN I TOLD a friend the title of the article I was working on, he said with some vehemence and amusement: 'Prophets? They don't need nourishing!' I knew exactly how he felt, both about the difficulties of my task and the nature of prophets, those awkward and presumptuous people who, like Elijah, constantly proclaim that God speaks through them. But even Elijah was fed, albeit by ravens.

In an interesting study of the character of Elijah,<sup>1</sup> it has been suggested that many aspects of his nature are mirrored in the behaviour of ravens. Ravens for instance move outside their social group as youngsters when they are convinced of their own strength and independence, but they still cry to their parents for food: 'Who gives food to the young ravens when they cry?' (Ps 147,9). Though so proud in front of Ahab, Elijah seemed continually to need God to demonstrate the genuineness of his prophetic gifts in public, because of his uncertainty about them within himself. He needed recognition from the people of Israel as the ravens need recognition from the older generation. All his restless coming and going revolves around this. He needed to test that he alone was still the prophet of Yahweh (1 Kg 18,36). This anxiousness meant that he never really learnt to trust in God. However, the unstinting ravens fed him in a regular and sustaining way. 'The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening' (1 Kg 17,6).

The need of spiritual sustenance and personal support is perhaps more acute in those rare people whose vision impels them ahead of the crowd than for the rest of us. They would not be out there if they had not experienced a call of some kind. At one level a prophetic call comes to those who are exceptionally aware of the false goals, hypocrisy and injustice in society or the Church. Answering such a call implies a risk of misunderstanding and antagonism, but it is only a by-product of a deeper vision, which

fires the willingness to take such risks. The recovery of prophecy today is linked with clarity of perception and spiritual awareness as well as some social sophistication. Simple approaches are dismissed as myopic in our present complex world, and without a wide spiritual vision prophecy can be positively harmful.<sup>2</sup> A call coming from such a vision will always need testing. If the call is responded to, it is the whole self which is being put at risk, including the bits of the personality which are normally concealed; the bits which have to be acknowledged and purified in a personal change, which may be as demanding as the changes implied for society in the subsequent prophecy.

It has been suggested that a false prophet is a person who sees what is wrong with society but does not give people the courage to change.<sup>3</sup> Anyone called spiritually to nourish a prophet would need to test this provision of courage, for some prophets do not really want change. Their vision is limited and they thrive on its negative aspects.

After Elijah's most presumptuous prophecy, at the beginning of his story, God sends him to hide in the ravine of Kerith brook, with the phrase 'turn eastward'. These Hebrew words can also be rendered as 'turn to face yourself'.<sup>4</sup> It is in the risk of facing the self and all that that implies, that the prophetic person most needs nourishing. The regular nature of the raven's ministrations, reflecting Elijah's dependence on God and the natural rhythms of day and night, is a model. This pattern may have helped him to a greater self-knowledge and a beginning of the recognition that his own restless energy was not the same as the will of God. However, it was not until right at the end of his turbulent ministry, when he went to stand before the Lord, that he understood that God had not been in the dramatic chariot rides, the restlessness, the interfering and the demands, but in the 'still small voice' (1 Kg 19,11-13). It was after this that the Lord sent Elijah to seek his successor 'by way of the wilderness', the same wilderness in which the angel had fed him when he despaired and wanted to die.

The traditional prophetic model of Elijah brings out the essential nature of the guide and friend who is needed to provide spiritual food for a prophetic person in place of ravens and angels. Such a person is needed to provide the support and understanding which are necessary in helping people to face their own inner depths and scrutinize their motives in responding to a call. In addition, they provide spiritual discernment, which leads to people in such a

demanding prophetic vocation discovering for themselves the right rhythms of engagement and withdrawal, social witness and prayer. Finally, such a friend needs to be someone with the courage to stand alongside the prophet in the wilderness of misrepresentation, jealousy and self-doubt and yet able to point to the signs of the time to let go the role.

For prophets, I suspect, are all extroverts and probably unaware of the unevenness of their own emotional development. This will lead to a need for constant reassurance and a dependence, once a public response exists, on a continuance of that response. This is not inconsistent with a certain aloofness, for the risks of involvement at the emotional level can divert from the passion of their prophecy. None of this will matter if they are aware of it, and here is the great role of the Church as nourisher—an anchor, a sign of the value of the inner world, but pointing a way out from the trap of pride. Anyone acting as a nourisher within the Church therefore has to be aware not only of the complexity of the prophet's inner calling, but of his or her own motives in getting involved beside them. Being caught up in the vision may inhibit the role of questioner, or being aware that the one being helped is 'far ahead' (if such an expression is ever appropriate in this context) may conceal inadequate detachment. To misquote a phrase of Charles Elliott's—radical prophecy also springs from radical contemplation. Prophets as extroverts need to be kept close to the roots of their inspiration, their awareness of God and the value of their gift, or the vision will fade or be distorted. A rooted vision will compel them to feed others with the truth as they see it. For this sense of nourishing continues through the prophets to the world. Elijah was frequently involved in giving food; not always palatable to those who received it—'Man of God, there is death in the pot!'—what a difficult man he must have been to walk beside. For prophecy is often seen as threatening.

All these positive signs woven into the prophetic calling are evident in the life of Jesus. It is possible that entering consciously into the tradition of this calling is, in itself, a kind of nourishment. After his wilderness time, when angels waited on him, Jesus began his public ministry at Nazareth by reading from Isaiah, deliberately entering into the tradition in order to discern the orientation of his own life,<sup>5</sup> as well as identifying with it in criticizing the existing order. Bringing good news to those in misfortune had to be reinterpreted for the Roman province of Judaea in the first century,

as this tradition has to be reinterpreted in every age. Such reinterpretation has to be understood in terms of events as experienced, rather than events as facts. There is always a price to pay for entering into this tradition.

William Blake is an example of someone with a vision, who consciously entered into the biblical tradition as a way of being nourished, while seeing his prophecies for the future fed also by models of an idyllic English past. At his period in the history of Europe, with the pace of change being accelerated by the industrial revolution, many prophetic women were being called from among the ranks of the Evangelical and Protestant Churches, who had only the bible to feed on spiritually. They kept their labouring communities together by a vision of equality based on the gospels and modelled on patterns of domestic and rural life from the recent rural past.<sup>6</sup> In a time of even greater change, like ours, where scholarship has made it increasingly hard to enter wholeheartedly into any aspect of the tradition in this way, where are the resources, other than the personal, to be found, which will nourish prophetic people? For there is an underlying assumption in our culture that there is no need for prophecy: enlightened scientific enquiry is said to be all we need to guide us on the right future path. I agree with Theodore Rozak, however, that these narrowing perceptions have led to a diminished mode of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The prophet's spiritual guide may also share in this. The true sign of a modern prophet may well be that he or she can reach beyond this diminishment and enlarge our horizons in new ways.

When I looked at the life and work of three English-speaking people in the modern world whom I thought of as prophetic, I found it hard to discover any other common denominator than this one: at some point in their lives they had realized the wider application of their own particular struggle, their own perspectives for change; and it was this which nourished them. E. F. Schumacher, for instance, realized from within his work as an economist with the National Coal Board that the fragmentation of outlook among specialists—economists, scientists and technologists—made it impossible for an overall challenge to be made to the accepted theory of endless economic growth. To see clearly enough to evolve a new life-style for himself he sacrificed the security of his position and explored a new, yet old, wisdom based on the human scale of need. Thus 'small is beautiful' became not only his personal resolution to this problem of human diminishment

through fragmentation and unnecessary expansion which was exploiting the earth, but a way of future economic development which is still a powerful force in the world.

Looking at the life of Martin Luther King I realized how nearly he might have remained just another inspiring black preacher from the southern United States. He did, however, respond to and indeed experience himself all the disadvantages, insults and violence to which southern blacks were subjected. In the process of his struggle for their integration with the rest of society, his prophetic voice was taken up by the media and rallied support from sympathizers throughout the country. Out of the challenge of this publicity he dreamed the extension of his dream. In his own life he was a threat to all racialists and he paid the price of his prophecy. But his voice still reaches around the world—'we must live together as brothers or die together as fools'. From within his own tradition he was fed on the bible and his people's struggle earthed his message.

Thomas Merton, a totally different kind of modern prophet, struggled through to the articulation of a gradually developing vision by means of his writing. This development was nourished by a faithfulness to his monastic vocation. Suffering the limitations of such a faithfulness seemed, in his prayer, to fuel and expand his vision so that by the time of his death he was seeing that his hopes, particularly his vision for convergent world faiths, was expressed as much by his life as by his writing. 'We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ'.

These three men were Christians from very different backgrounds. Their traditions fed them to a limited extent. They were also nourished, particularly during their wilderness years, by a sense of the justice and holy necessity of what they were struggling towards. One of them, Martin Luther King, like many prophets before him, arose from, spoke for and was nourished by, a group with whom he was identified. The other two were lonelier and Merton was, in some respects, cut off from society by his vocation but no less perceptive about society for all that. Some prophets cry out as complete aliens within their own culture and they will be temperamentally the most in need of the support of a spiritual friend, prepared to bridge the gap in understanding and risk the alienation for themselves which may result. But all people need such a friend and, as I have suggested, all prophets need them in a special way, a supportive way which is not uncritical. Accepting

the person while testing the prophetic calling, as any other religious calling has to be tested. Such testing will need to go beyond some of our current reassuring attitudes. The frontiers which prophecy crosses are tough areas. Many things will threaten the friend's faith and emotional security, but spiritual direction which is too concerned with personal feelings and attitudes may be inadequate in such circumstances and too bland to nourish deeply in the long run. Prophets need to be confronted with the possibility of acting out their own anger and not facing the consequences for themselves of what they demand from others. Only after this can the guide and friend give recognition to the calling, which will be what the genuine prophet, after the pattern of Elijah, so much desires. For it is not a personal recognition which is sought, but the recognition of a vision arrived at by radical reflection and a radical understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God.

It is this radical and exceptional nature of the prophetic calling which has allowed me to omit all the other obvious sources of spiritual nourishment used and needed by ordinary people, which prophets must also draw upon. I cannot, for instance, imagine a person sensitive enough to discern some of the causes of the warped and self-destructive aspects of our society, who was not also sensitive to the inspiration of great music and poetry. The lonely aspects of a prophet's development, which will include periods of withdrawal from social engagement to purify and 'centre' the calling, may also mean that nature—wide or mountainous landscapes, the sky and the sea—will feed their reflective imagination more than most people's. Prophets need to discern for themselves the well-springs of their own inspiration, which will not be unconnected with their discernment for society. Being familiar with ways in which they are nourished by aesthetic experience is an important part of this awareness.

Though unlikely to be encouraged by the Church in radical social action arising from their discernment, prophets can still find inspiration in worship which nourishes their whole being. For a Christian, to share the Eucharist with friends who share the vision must remain the greatest strength. Official blessing in their lifetime, however, is as unlikely as it is for saints. Prophets—and many saints—thrive on confrontation; it is in the nature of their calling and probably makes their adrenalin flow. No wonder the Church keeps its head down and many Church people echo the remark of my friend with which I began.

When Bob Geldof met Mother Teresa she said to him, 'I can do something you can't do, and you can do something I can't do. We both have to do it'.<sup>8</sup> Here a woman, often criticized for not questioning society's values enough, herself a symbol of the most caring Christian tradition, is supporting and encouraging a man often seen as an iconoclast in his own person. She is encouraging him to do it his way; to question, to ridicule, to cut through red-tape and to embody a prophetic vision for the world. This is nourishment for a prophet. For finally the most spiritually and personally nourishing thing for prophets is to know that their vision finds a response beyond the limit of its origins. People are called to prophecy today who speak for, and to, the world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Howard: *Aspects of the biblical character of Elijah* (Guild of Pastoral Psychology, Guild Lecture No 221).

<sup>2</sup> Leech, Kenneth: *The social God* (London, Sheldon Press, 1981) p 13.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholl, Donald: 'On being a prophet' in *CR Review* 323 (1983).

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> See Carroll Stuhlmueller, 'What price prophecy?' in *The Way* (1980) p 168.

<sup>6</sup> See Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic sons and daughters* (Princeton, University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Roszak, Theodore: *Where the wasteland ends* (Faber, 1972), pp 134 & 135.

<sup>8</sup> Geldof, Bob: *Is that it?* (Penguin, 1986).