

SCRIPTURE TRENDS

Prophets, Poets, Parables: a Study of Jesus as Prophet

*I put my words into your mouth.
This day I give you authority
over nations and over kingdoms,
to pull down and to uproot,
to destroy and to demolish,
to build and to plant.
Jeremiah.*

PROPHETS ENGAGE in a curious business. Their task is to call attention to the state of affairs, to wake people from their sleep of complacency, to re-vision reality so that its giftedness is recognized. H. D. Thoreau suggests that 'To be awake is to be alive'.¹ Only by earnestly contemplating the present will one ever experience life. 'When you draw in a deep breath, o monks, be aware that you are drawing in a deep breath. And when you draw in a shallow breath, o monks, be aware that you are drawing in a shallow breath. Awareness. Attention. Absorption. No more.'² The enemy of the prophet is sleepy complacency which wishes to give the impression that a shallow breath is actually a deep breath, that injustice is truly just, that complacency is more profitable than tension.

A prophet must fight counter-culturally, against what Brueggemann calls the 'Royal Consciousness'. The Royal Consciousness as he describes it is the tendency we have to subscribe to the values of our culture, and the culture's desire to solicit subscription. Its purpose is to maintain the status quo, to preserve the social structure, to eliminate challenge. It creates a type of amnesia which says, 'This is the way we've always done it; we don't know any other way'. The genius of the Royal Consciousness is that it knows that when people are sated they do not ask questions, they have forgotten the struggle, but when the bellies are empty, that is when the murmuring begins. The Israelites, in Egypt, cried out to God who sent them Moses. God, through Moses, saved them from the hands of the Egyptians. But hunger harangues a happy heart. In the desert and without food, they cried out against Moses: 'If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat round the fleshpots and had plenty of bread to eat! But you have brought us out into this wilderness to let this whole assembly starve to death' (Exod 16,2-3). The oppression of Pharaoh pales in comparison to their tumultuous tummies. They leave no question: happier oppressed but full, than free but hungry.

Brueggemann summarizes:

The royal programme of achievable satiation

(a) is fed by a management mentality which believes there are no mysteries to honour, only problems to be solved;

(b) is legitimated by an 'official religion of optimism', which believes God has no business other than to maintain our standard of living, ensuring his own place in his palace;

(c) requires the annulment of the neighbour as a life-giver in our history; it imagines that we can live outside history as self-made men and women.³

In describing his parents' vision of God, Antonio Salieri, the protagonist of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, illustrates the Royal Consciousness. 'Their notion of God was a superior Hapsburg emperor, inhabiting a Heaven only slightly farther off than Vienna. All they required of Him was to protect commerce, and keep them forever preserved in mediocrity.'⁴ God's purpose, God's vocation, if you will, is to serve the dominant culture, to make certain that everyone of value is satisfied, living snugly in 'a thick, gelatinous stream of comfortability'.⁵ 'This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride of wealth and food in plenty, comfort and ease, and yet she never helped the poor and wretched' (Ezek 16,49). 'And as long as the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism.'⁶

We too, like all the pieces to fit together in a nice, neat puzzle. A puzzle-piece that refuses to be placed, that refuses to submit to the structure of the dominant culture is looked upon as a mis-fit. The prophet is the mis-fit. The prophet suggests that a new puzzle is being revealed; that mere rearrangement of the same pieces into a different design is unsatisfactory. The mis-fitted prophet represents the emergence of a new reality. The prophet proclaims the presentation of a new puzzle, with pieces of different shapes and colours, textures and composition, not with a singular solution that will be pounded together by an overseer, but rather, a puzzle with many solutions, solved through the interaction and exchange of its members.

Language has a crucial place in the activity of culture. Communication is a critical component of human interaction. We often take for granted the power contained in language. Language helps us to name our world, it is useful for the exchange of ideas between people. Language creates reality. Hebrew tradition exemplifies this. Consider the creation of the world; 'God said, "Let there be light", and there was light'. God spoke, and creation sprang into being. God is creative with language, with the Word.

Language has the power to create and the power to destroy. It is precisely because language can provide such control that constitutional

governments value freedom of speech. Perhaps we recognize language's fertility, theoretically. However, in common practice we fail to honour the significance of communication. We fall into cliché. We use stock phrases until they are impotent. Rather than exploring language, we settle for loaded yet disarmed rhetoric.

Each of us has a 'warehouse of words'. We have personal dictionaries from which we draw terms for daily communication. This vocabulary becomes familiar to us. It is by way of personal style that authorship is often identifiable. For example, biblical scholars recognize the writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke by their use of vocabulary. The Gospel of Matthew can be identified by stylistic clues such as 'behold', 'you have heard it said', 'kingdom of heaven', dreams, 'Son of David'. Mark uses 'Son of Man', 'immediately', 'Reign of God'. Luke employs canticles, announcements, 'in due season', 'Jesus of Nazareth'. These lists are not exhaustive, certainly. The purpose is to exemplify the significance of personal vocabularies. The danger in a vocabulary that borders on cliché is that it becomes narrow, uncritical. Our words and grammar are taken for granted. What happens as a result is that language becomes unnoticed, thus meaning is diminished. The uncritical use of language leads to its impotence, has the danger of falling into meaninglessness. At the very least, cliché results in the impoverishment of symbol; it is the threshold of minimalism. 'Settled language is our everyday attempt to anesthetize language's explosiveness . . . The one who traffics only in settled language has nothing new to say; the one who exploits frontier language can only point to the unknown.'⁷ Scott describes settled language. Settled language seeks standard definition. Such and such a word means this and only this.

The prophet combats settled language; (s)he challenges language's indifference and pushes it to its limits so that new horizons can be realized. Language which is not in flux is dead language. The prophet is creative with language, adventurous with it. As a result, language regains its creative power.

Royal Consciousness and the indifference of language are two essential planes that must be understood before a prophet's activity can be understood. Since a prophet challenges these, their importance must become clear before we can understand what it is that a prophet does. With this understanding, we can now move to distinguishing marks of a prophet.

Concerning prophets, there are seven salient aspects that we can delineate.

1. Prophets are sent by God. They are chosen and called by God; thus, their ministry is confirmed or validated by God. If we look at the call of Ezekiel, we find these words: 'He said to me, "Man, I am sending you to the Israelites"' (Ezek 2,3). To Jeremiah, the Lord gives the

command, 'Go and proclaim this message' (Jer 3,12). Isaiah tells us, 'I heard the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" And I answered, "Here am I, send me"' (Isai 6,8-9). Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus claims his call when he proclaims,

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;
 he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
 to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the
 blind;
 to let the broken victims go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4,18-19).

With Jesus, we recognize his confirmation from God at his baptism. The phenomenon of the talking sky shows that God validates Jesus's mission.

To say that a prophet is sent by God implies that the prophet's mission is not the prophet's alone. God initiates the activity. The prophet is working for God. In other words, the design or plan belongs to God; the prophet is God's instrument for putting the plan into action. The news the prophet announces is a message from God, not a message that the prophet has created.

2. The prophet comes from the community, is called out from the community to work for God. This is an important point. While the prophet is engaging in the mission of the divine, (s)he is also sharing in the experience of the community. The prophet is not an outsider. 'A ruler shall appear, one of themselves, a governor shall arise from their own number' (Jer 30,21). Often the prophet has grown up in the community. Sometimes, as in the case of Moses, the prophet has been separated from the group yet discovers an overwhelming bondedness with distant kin. Therefore, the prophet has a profound love for the members of the community. The incarnation demonstrates that Jesus is identified with humanity. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke make it clear that Jesus is one of us. Jesus knew human experience. He was one like us, the carpenter's son. The townspeople knew him; perhaps they thought they knew him too well. 'So he came to Nazareth . . . they were surprised that words of grace should fall from his lips. "Is not this Joseph's son?"' (Lk 4,16-23). The intimate knowledge of the prophet means that (s)he knows the state of the community, knows what is going on in it. The prophet experiences what the community experiences. The prophet can recognize the injustices. The prophet sees the poor, the blind, the ones crippled by fear, the ones afraid to live. The prophet knows what entraps people, what idols command their worship, what holds them powerless. The prophet knows what makes these living people dead.

3. The prophet brings to expression the state of the community. (S)he voices what people are afraid to speak. In Brueggemann's terminology,

the prophet challenges the Royal Consciousness. The prophet says, 'Everyone knows what is going on here, yet no one is willing to say it. I see injustice here, injustice that will only be destroyed if we begin to talk about it'. Language creates reality. By verbalizing the problems, the prophet admits they exist. And the community is also empowered to admit their existence. Isaiah verbalizes these evils for the community in chapter one:

O sinful nation, people loaded with iniquity,
race of evildoers, wanton destructive children
who have deserted the Lord . . . (v 4).

Your country is desolate, your cities lie in ashes.
Strangers devour your land before your eyes . . . (v 7).

The prophet challenges 'voluntary amnesia' which says, 'We don't want to remember, it's too painful; remembering will disrupt the status quo; our roles might get changed'. At the end of *Becket: the honour of God*, King Henry II 'voluntarily forgets' his love for Thomas Becket because admitting his love is too painful and it puts him in danger of forfeiting his role as king. ('Yes, I loved him! And I believe I still do! Enough, O God! Enough! Stop, O God, I've had enough!' 'I can do nothing! Nothing! So long as he's alive, I'll never be able to do a thing. I tremble before him astonished. And I am the King! Will no one rid me of him?') Henry's disappointed love hurts so much that the only way he can continue to be king is if the object of his love is destroyed. It is easier to forget than it is to deal with the pain. The prophet brings everything out into the open. (S)he lances festering wounds. But, at the same time, the prophet does not operate brutally.

4. The prophet is a poet. The prophet uses metaphorical language. (S)he roots up and tears down, destroys and demolishes, in order to build and to plant. Certainly, the prophet is an iconoclast, but for the purpose of bringing about change. We have already touched on this in our discussion of language. The poetical prophet is an artist; such creativity with language carries with it a responsibility. The prophet's activity with language is not haphazard; it is not careless; it is not uncritical. The prophet's purpose in exploiting language is not to diminish it, but rather to enliven it, to broaden it, to deepen its associations. So, while there are destruction and demolition, there is also new life, creative activity.

5. The prophet gives a feeling of hope in a message of doom. 'Though your sins are scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they are dyed crimson, they may yet be like wool' (Isai 1,18). The message of the prophet is that injustice is doomed. Unreflective acceptance of the status quo will no longer be tolerated. Again, Jeremiah is useful. We must raze structures so that they can be rebuilt (Jer 1,10). Some things must end

so that others can begin. The proclamation of the end of injustice is the announcement of the beginning of a more just society. 'On the day the Lord binds up the wounds of the people, God will heal the bruises left by God's blows' (Isai 30,26). Presumably, we should all rejoice in the coming of justice. Justice should bring happiness to all. Rich and poor alike benefit from a just social order. However, there are some people who expect more justice than is just. Unless they are willing to sell their suits for sack-cloth, they will be destroyed with the destruction of injustice.

6. The one who is employed by God is an advocate for God before humanity. The one who shares in the experience of the community is an advocate for humanity before God. The prophet proclaims to the people what God has to say. 'Man, I have made you a watchman for the Israelites; you will take messages from me and carry my warnings to them' (Ezek 3,17). 'I will state my case against my people' (Jer 1,16). God who loves creation desires to bring it close. The prophet pleads God's case for justice. In addition, the prophet brings to God the needs of the people. 'How long, O Lord? Will you reject us forever?' The prophet acts as a mediator. (S)he sees both sides of the story; (s)he bridges the chasm that separates God and humanity.

7. The prophet calls attention to what is seen, calls attention to injustice; but the prophet does not give a specific plan about how things should be changed. Here, again, the prophet's use of language is important. It is through creative use of language that new realities are possible. The prophet suggests that people question their beliefs, their value systems. This is accomplished by providing new images.

When the prophet uses language creatively, a new network of associations is provided. A word is a symbol which points to associations or meanings. When a word is defined strictly, when it is limited, when it is 'settled', its associations or meanings are limited. But when a word is pushed to the 'frontier' its associations are opened up, thus new meaning is brought to the word. For example, Jesus's association of the kingdom with the poor adds a new dimension to the image. The kingdom is not only for the rich; not only for the ritually pure. Its meaning becomes broader. If we always associate happiness with money, power, beauty, success, we will never be able to consider that someone poor, powerless, unattractive or unsuccessful could be happy. The prophet helps us to think new thoughts so that new realities are possible. The prophet challenges our thinking without telling us what we ought to think.

The prophets were passionately involved in their work. They deeply desired change. In many ways, they were looked upon as being weird. They went against the grain. They did not subscribe to the values of the dominant culture. But at the same time, they were in tune to everything that was happening in their society.

To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.⁸

The emergence of John the Baptizer comes after a long period of prophetic silence in the history of Israel. The period of silence was understood to mean the absence of God's spirit moving among the people. It was a result of the sinfulness of the nation. John's language and activity indicate this. There is something prophetic about his dress and his behaviour. John's appearance and activity are reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. John proclaims the necessity for the people to return to God. Calling Israel a 'brood of vipers', he associates them with pagans. They have forgotten that Yahweh is their God. They have forgotten who they are. The spirit of God is no longer with them. Conversion entails reclaiming their stories.

The problem with amnesiacs is not that they have forgotten their names, but that they have misplaced their stories and, as consequence, their identities.

David Buttrick

The emergence of Jesus in the history of Israel marks the emergence of a new period of grace. The first we see of Jesus's public life is his baptism. That Jesus submits to baptism by John shows that he is one with the community of the repentant. 'Prophets have a way of conjoining what they want to say with striking symbolic actions.'⁹ The baptism of Jesus by John symbolizes the need for all of Israel to be baptized. It highlights the need for radical conversion on the part of the whole nation of Israel. The baptism of the prophet illustrates that if one close to God undergoes baptism, all the people need a change of heart. They must re-discover their history, their identity.

The experience of lost identity is often painful. Clearly in the case of Israel, sin was the cause of their lost history. John the Baptizer grieves Israel's distance from God. The silence of God, indicating their sinfulness, also points to their rejection of the prophets. The following selection suggests that our stories can be lost not only by our desire but also by external forces.

Somebody has walked off with all my stuff. Somebody almost walked off with alla my stuff like a kleptomaniac sneaking in the middle of the night and forgettin while stealin this is mine. This aint yr stuff.¹⁰

The lady in green who speaks these lines in the 1975 choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, typifies the experience of lost history. *Colored girls* is the powerful story of what happened to black women as a result of domination by men and whites. They had the experience of having everything taken away from them. They were left with nothing except abused dignity as human persons. Their stuff, their stories were taken away from them, their roots were forgotten. 'Stealin my stuff doesn't make it yrs, makes it stolen. Ya gotta give it to me, I'm the only one can handle it.'¹¹ Pain, anger and frustration accompany loss of identity.

Alice Walker suggests how the stories were reclaimed.

He was The One, The Hero, The One Fearless Person for whom we had waited. I hadn't even realized before that we had been waiting for Martin Luther King, Jr. He gave us back our homeland, he gave us back our heritage: the bones of our ancestors. He gave us the blueness of the sky in autumn, the colors of winter as well as glimpses of the green vacation-time spring. He gave us full use of our own woods and restored our memories to those of us who were forced to run away. He gave us continuity of place . . . He gave us home.¹²

He gave them their stuff back.

Jesus did the same for Israel. As the eschatological prophet, he reminded them of who they are: Yahweh's chosen ones. He restored the memories of those who were running from them. He came as the prophet who 'would announce a final opportunity for *metanoia*'.¹³ Jesus proclaimed the urgent need for the people to return to God. He brings the definitive word on salvation. Never again were the people to forget that they belong to God.

The definitive word on salvation is proclaimed as the gospel. Central to Jesus's coming is the notion of *euaggelion*, good news, cheerful news about the kingdom. It is good news offered in a new way. The announcement of Jesus is that salvation is not only for the Jews. It is for all. The gospel is the proclamation of the sovereign graciousness of God for all people. It cannot be reserved for only a few; it is not distributed only to those who meet certain requirements. If it is universal, it is for all. The goodness of God, as a definitive act, cannot be preached unless it is preached to all. It is not something reserved to an elite group.

Jesus is making new associations. Salvation can no longer be understood in terms of Israel alone. Jesus is broadening the meaning: Jews and Gentiles alike. We have seen that this is the method of the prophet. Let us turn our attention now to Jesus's use of parables as the way in which he announced the good news.

The Bible does not so much mean as it creates meaning.

Brandon Scott

The idea behind it is to make you consider your life, your own goings-on, your own world, from a different angle for once.

Edward Schillebeeckx

Scholars agree that Jesus spoke in parables. Parables are not unique to Jesus, however. In fact, parables are employed by many people. Telling a parable is a way in which the prophets have been able to bring about a new way of looking at life. Today, however, we have difficulty understanding the impact of parables. Part of the problem is that the parables preserved in the scriptures were written down from an oral tradition, an oral culture. Today, we live in a written culture (that is quickly becoming a graphic culture). To help us understand what the parables can mean for us, we must be able to understand what the parables meant at the time they were told. We must understand the language, the culture, the history and the literary genre of parable.

In general, a parable begins with a familiar situation, it has a familiar starting point. A parable starts from common human experience. For this reason, the listeners easily become part of the story. But suddenly, the story takes an unexpected shift. Central to a parable is the surprising change of expectations.

The fact is, a parable turns around a 'scandalizing' centre, at any rate a core of paradox and novelty. A parable often stands things on their head; it is meant to break through our conventional thinking and being. A parable is meant to start the listener thinking by means of a built-in element of the 'surprising' and the 'alienating' in a common, everyday event.¹⁴

The reversal of the expected outcome forces the listeners to look at things differently. Presumably, they would say, 'I've never thought about it like that'.

Part of the genius of parables is that they are constructed in such a way that they are new for each age. By their very nature, parables cannot be nailed down. There is no definitive interpretation of parables, only approximations. As the language of a prophet, parables force listeners to broaden their understanding. A parable exploits frontier language. It creates new associations and in this way gives people a nuanced perception of reality. A parable helps people reclaim their stories; it returns meaning to language. Words in a parable are carefully chosen in order to renew the symbols rather than diminish them. Parables bring newness out of

those things that have been worn out. For Brueggemann, parables challenge the complacency of Royal Consciousness.

We have been discussing prophets, poets, parablers. The art of the prophet is powerful. The prophet is a vehicle for change. We have seen how a prophet's language helps to create a new reality. Let us turn our attention to Jesus, exploring his use of language, to see how he empowered people to re-vision life.

Jesus was a master parabler. His language is preserved in metaphorical structure: parables. Three parables will help us get a glimmer of Jesus's method. The first, a 'one-liner', is from Mark 13,33. 'The kingdom of God is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.'

This parable begins with something familiar: bread-baking day. On the surface, the parable appears to be pretty harmless. Perhaps initial associations are the wonderful smell of bread in the oven, the thought of hot bread, oozing with butter. But look more closely. Study the images and their associations:

<i>Leaven</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>Hid</i>	<i>Three Measures</i>	<i>All Leavened</i>
odoriferous	outcast	concealed	forty pounds	completion
rotten	servant	mixed		finality
moral				inevitability
corruption				

This parable combines negative and positive symbols. We might think about other times in Jewish history when bread was made. We think of the Witch of Endor making bread for Saul (1 Sam 28,24). We might think of Sarah making bread for her and her husband's three visitors (Gen 18). Or we might think of the widow preparing bread for Elijah (1 Kg 17). These instances were associated with epiphany. They are positive images.

But, because of the negative associations, our initial image is shaken. Jesus associates the kingdom with leaven.

In Judaism unleaven bread is a symbol of the holy as can be seen in the feast of Unleaven Bread, Passover (Exod 12, 14-20). To associate leaven with the kingdom of God goes against the normal association of unleaven with the holy.¹⁵

Leaven is rotten bread dough. It is a sign of moral corruption. The image of 'woman' would bring to mind an association with 'outcast'. To hide something means deceptively to conceal it. Three measures of flour seems innocent enough, until one realizes that it equals about forty pounds. Thus, Jesus is describing a ridiculous situation: imagine the spectacle of watching this woman knead forty plus pounds of bread dough. 'Till it

was all leaven' suggests the completion of the process, everything is affected. With these additional associations, we might paraphrase the parable: 'The kingdom of God is like smelly, rotten bread dough which an outcast deceptively concealed in forty pounds of flour till it was all corrupt,' Or in today's language we might say, 'The kingdom of God is like a rotten apple that spoils the whole barrel'.

To associate the kingdom with corruption is unusual at the very least. But Jesus does not sugar the parable. He does not make the leaven unleaven; he does not make the unclean clean. He does not whitewash the image. He forces people to start thinking in different ways.

The parable of the mustard seed challenges normal associations of the kingdom.

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (Mark 4,30-32).

In this parable, Jesus associates the kingdom with a bush. A mustard plant is not something awesome. In fact, it is not really a large bush at all: a mustard plant is rather scrawny. A first-century Jew would prefer to compare the kingdom of God with a Lebanon cedar: a towering, stately strong, majestic tree. To think of the kingdom as a plant goes against the normal association of the kingdom with something grand.

A final parable, the familiar one of the good Samaritan, is more detailed than the previous examples; and it plays with personal prejudices. This story is immediately engaging. It has the elements of good drama. The ending is unexpected. A man is travelling the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho—alone. The situation raises questions: Is he crazy? Why is he there? Could that be me? The expected hero, the priest, ignores the man in need. Why? Was he scared? Was he afraid of risking ritual impurity? The Levite comes along. Could this be the one to help? No. He ignores the helpless victim. Why? Would he ignore me, too? The next wanderer we would expect should fit the pattern: priest, Levite, *Israelite*. But it does not. Jesus does not say an *Israelite*. The likelihood is raised that the person in the ditch is me. A Samaritan happens along. Jesus is playing with us now. We expect the Samaritan, our mortal enemy, to kick us while we are down. But no! The mortal enemy has compassion! The Samaritan takes care of the helpless one.

As listeners, we can have different reactions to the parable. We can say it is just a story, so who cares? Or, we might agree that the hero of the story is the Samaritan, but maybe the Samaritan acted out of selfish

reasons. Or we can say that since the hero of the story is our mortal enemy, somehow, to be in the kingdom means to be in a place where our mortal enemy becomes our saviour. That is a new way of looking at things.

Another way in which Jesus teased people into re-visioning life was his use of case law mockery. Jesus suggests weird cases that ridicule the attitude created by the law. His focus is on attitude rather than law as law. 'In terms of statistics the prophet's statements are grossly inaccurate. Yet, their concern is not with facts, but with the meaning of the facts'.¹⁶ Jesus's use of the law suggests that ethics is a matter of personal responsibility. It is an interior decision, not an external force. The law was used as the criterion for righteousness. Jesus changes the focus. His criterion is: how have you behaved with the marginalized? Such a standard is less objective than the clear-cut law. You cannot tell for sure if you are righteous or not. This ambiguous criterion diminishes the probability of self-righteousness.

Jesus as prophet helps people to envision a new reality. He helps them think things they have never thought before. He talks about the kingdom; the kingdom is present in a new way.

It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything.

Henry James

There will be times when in the throes of passion you will be tempted to desert the wisdom. In the face of disillusionment and setback, you can so easily lose the rapture and the ecstasy. And in moments of discouragement and betrayal, you will feel sure that your life has been a deception. Resist that! And above all, resist the urge to keep clear of life's adventure and risk. All that can do is keep your life safe and small. It is not small! It is abundant.

Gavin Barnes O.S.B.

Jesus faces the angry crowd. As a prophet, he risks everything to be faithful to the wisdom he has known concerning the abundance of life. Life is so abundant that even facing the ultimate witness of his prophetic mission, death, Jesus shows that life is even more powerful than death. Jesus has spent his whole ministry inviting people to re-vision life. Now, at the point of death, he gives even that new associations. Death is not final. It is part of a process. It is the passage from 'life through death to new life'.

In William Styron's novel, *Sophie's choice*, the relationship of life and death is given a new perspective. At the end of the novel, Sophie, who is constantly making choices between life and death, must choose between Stingo and Nathan. Life with Stingo in the country would be long and

mediocre. Life with Nathan would be adventurous, but brief. Sophie chooses Nathan: better to live and die than live half-dead. She did not fear death, she feared living half-dead.

Jesus's choice for life was to live fully and help others realize life's abundance. His choice for life that led him to death provides a new interpretation of both life and death. Jesus could have avoided his death by remaining silent about his life convictions. Somehow his convictions about life were unacceptable to the dominant culture. What was it about Jesus that made the people so angry that they would want to kill him? Several ideas have been proposed. Let us consider three of them.

It is clear that Jesus spoke with authority. But many viewed him as speaking on his own authority. In other words, he was seen as standing against the tradition. In the first century, when the Jews were suffering from the oppression of the Romans, they did not need any internal trouble. A new authority figure in the Jewish community would cause internal division. To preserve the community, rebellious voices would have to be silenced.

It is conceivable that Jesus's message was too harsh for people to tolerate. It is obvious that Jesus reversed people's expectations. He associated the kingdom with sinners, with women, the poor, tax collectors, prostitutes. He suggested that the marginalized were the sign of the kingdom of God.

People expected that the Messiah would be one who acts in power. Jesus told them that the Messiah is one who acts in weakness. There is so much in Jesus that goes against the grain of the dominant culture. 'The dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it.'¹⁷ Jesus's activity of twisting and nuancing reality, while creative in the prophetic sense, to the people was seen as a threat of destruction.

Finally, the notion of Jesus as king was a sour wine to swallow. If Jesus is a king, what does his kingdom look like? His activity and his preaching suggest that it is a kingdom of sinners. Do I want to be part of such a kingdom?

You cannot tell people about their divinity unless they ask.
Until they ask, they are not ready to hear it.

Ram Dass

We have considered the work of the prophet. We explored the areas of culture and language. We addressed the marks of a prophet. We looked at Jesus's prophetic activity, trying to attain an understanding of the importance of his use of the prophetic tools and the impact he had on his society. We now ask about contemporary civilization. What value does this prophetic insight have for us today?

As much today, as in any other time, we are in need of prophetic utterance. Prophets as vehicles for change, as catalyst of conversion remind people of their stories. Today the dominant culture has suppressed our stories, our struggles, our heritage. It has made us forget our divinity. We suffer from amnesia; we have lost our identities.

While not all of us are prophets, we must be open to the voice of the prophet. We must listen as they speak.

In the eighties, we may have to hold up our national policy, an increase in defence spending coupled with a decrease in welfare concern and announce its obvious disobedience in the sight of God. God naming may be risky business because the dangers of misnaming are ever present (not to mention annoyance which such preaching may evoke in politically precommitted congregations). Nevertheless, the risk of silence is even greater: *Failure to name God in the world can only certify God's absence!*¹⁸

To be prophetic today entails reclaiming our stories. It means understanding and engaging prophetic imagery; it demands attention to our use of language. It demands that we 'risk the salt on the popcorn'.¹⁹ It means exposing the values of our culture to criticism, challenging what we believe so that we can examine the validity of our presuppositions. Transforming our culture implies providing new ways of thinking, new associations to our impoverished, burnt-out, over-extended symbols. Because only when we can think new thoughts can there be new realities, new puzzles with pieces of different shapes and colours, textures and composition.

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NOTES

¹ Thoreau, Henry David: 'Walden, or life in the woods', *The Norton anthology of American literature*, eds Gottesman et al., (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980), p 666.

² de Mello, Anthony S.J.: *The song of the bird*, (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1982), p 21.

³ Brueggeman, Walter: *Prophetic imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press) pp 42-3.

⁴ Shaffer, Peter: *Amadeus*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p 10.

⁵ Connolly, Myles: *Mr. Blue*, (Garden City, NY: Double Day Books, 1928), p 74.

⁶ Brueggemann, pp 20-1.

⁷ Scott, Bernard Brandon: *The word of God in words*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p 32.

⁸ Heschel, Abraham J.: *The prophets: volume I*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p 4.

⁹ Schillebeeckx, Edward: *Jesus: an experiment in Christology*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p 138.

¹⁰ Shange, Ntozake: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p 52.

¹¹ Shange, p 52.

¹² Walker, Alice: *In search of our mothers' gardens: womanist prose*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p 144-45.

¹³ Schillebeeckx, p 118.

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, p 156.

¹⁵ Scott, p 23.

¹⁶ Heschel, p 14.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, p 14.

¹⁸ Buttrick, David: *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p 18.

¹⁹ Shea, John: *The Spirit Master* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1987), p 243.