

Christ Church
6th after Trinity July 11th 2021
Amos 7.7-15; Mark 6.14-29

I think you'll agree that this is a terrible Gospel account! At least, it's an account of a terrible event. Herodias was angry with John the Baptist for criticizing her immoral marital relationship. And so, when her daughter danced beautifully – and probably bewitchingly – before Herod and his guests, and Herod offered her anything – up to half his Kingdom – she went to her mother, Herodias, and asked what her request should be.

Well, people – even young, beautiful girls – may have been more barbaric than ... or more used to barbarism. But the girl – it seems with no hesitation at all – carried out her mother's wishes and asked for the head of John the Baptist. Now, I would like to think that the girl shrank back, when this macabre and pitiable item was handed to her on a platter.

But there is no evidence of that. It seems that Herod was the only one with any remorse in this whole terrible business, but he felt compelled to give the command for this dreadful deed to be done. In fact, we're told that he was "*deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.*" This was the only sign of any sorrow at this happening.

But when we look back on John the Baptist's life, he could never have had it easy. He was born to be a forerunner – someone who went ahead – heralded the Messiah. Anyone going ahead has to question what or who he is going ahead of. And when John the Baptist was thrown in prison, he **did** question if Jesus was the one who was to come or were they to wait for another. Jesus got the answer to him in no uncertain terms, but even so, John's life ended with this terrible and unnecessary event.

So what was it like to be a Prophet? John the Baptist – the herald – the forerunner – was also known as a prophet. However, after Christ was born, there was not the same need for prophecy. Christ was the prophecy fulfilled! Even so, prophets pepper our Old Testament scriptures; and without the numerous accounts of their prophecies, the Old Testament would be considerably shorter. But like John the Baptist, the prophets sometimes wavered. And they weren't all confident, sure and able!

In our Old Testament reading today, Amos says: "*The Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me: 'Go, prophecy to my people, Israel'*". Anybody embarking on a task like that nowadays would expect to have a degree in Divinity at least. And yet Amos was an uneducated shepherd. I think Moses gives us the best example of fear ... and absolute shyness to the extreme! Moses was a shepherd tending his father-in-law, Jethro's flock. And the Lord, having called him, took one-and-a-half Chapters of the book Exodus to convince Moses, that he **had** been called, he **was** empowered, and he **could** do the job that the Lord was asking of him, which

was – initially - to assemble the elders of Israel, and proclaim to them the Word of the Lord.

Hopefully, our new Deacon Simon, will have a bit more confidence!

But even after one-and-a-half Chapters of Exodus, Moses said: "*O my Lord, please send someone else.*" So if the great Moses – Prophet and Patriarch – could be that shy and unwilling to speak God's Word to the people of Israel, how might Amos have felt?

Jeremiah was prolific in prophecy. His Old Testament book consists of fifty-two chapters, and many of those begin: "*The Word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning ...*" whatever it was concerning. But Jeremiah, for all his prophecies, was imprisoned, dropped into a cistern, and threatened with death on more than one occasion, because people in positions of power could not accept his prophecies even though Jeremiah was certain that his words were from the Lord.

So Prophets were not popular people ... even though everybody of some importance seemed to consult with a seer. People were quite anxious to know the outcome – the future – but rather more critical if that outcome didn't suit them. Well, there seems no place in society for a Prophet nowadays unless it's to tell us that England will be the victors tonight in the World Cup!

People might want to see into the future – know the outcome – but it's likely that their path towards this would be entirely secular and might not be expected to involve the Lord at all. In fact, with many concerns and major discussions, the odd plea for a prayer might only be for success and not the Will of God, which takes us right back to some of those calling on the prayers and prophecies of Jeremiah. Good news was surely the only news to be accepted and tolerated!

But where does that leave us in the present time, where Prophets belong to a bygone age, and where "*Thy Will be done*" remains mainly locked in The Lord's Prayer, and isn't part of many people's plea to God when the chips are down? Where does all this leave us? Well, I was rather searching round for an example or an illustration – a little clue from the Lord – and then this very simple event happened last Tuesday.

I saw a little single-decker bus at a bus stop – not here. I saw the driver inside it, although I knew the bus wasn't due to leave for a little while. Even so, I hurried over to the bus, but found the doors closed and the driver nowhere to be seen. I knew he hadn't left the bus, because I'd had my eye on it all the time. So feeling curious, I stood on tiptoe and peered inside. I didn't see the driver, but I saw the soles of his shoes. He was a Muslim kneeling down to pray. I stood back and waited thoughtfully for the bus doors to open. Bus drivers, who don't leave their bus for a break, are under pressure – psychological pressure from their waiting passengers, who only want to

get the bus moving. There was a café nearby, where most of the drivers were congregating.

This driver could have joined his fellow drivers and been able to relax away from his bus. But he didn't. Instead, he chose to talk to the Lord.

When I was allowed on the bus, I asked the driver: "were you saying your prayers?" "Yes," he said. "My God bids me to talk with Him frequently, and to listen." That, I thought, was the most important word in the sentence: "listen".

The Prophets – if they were true, and not false Prophets – listened.

Moses, Jeremiah, Amos, John the Baptist weren't out to give news that people wanted to hear, but what they **needed** to hear! Now that the prophecy of the Messiah is fulfilled in Christ, there's not much of a role for Prophets. But would we listen anyway? The important message – through the Prophets – through Christ Himself, I believe – is to listen ... listen in prayer to our Lord!

Amen