

"Prophets [and Poets]": Eldering in Advent

Sunday Gospels 2, 3 and 4 in Advent signal the importance of John the Baptist as prophet in preparing ground for the coming of Jesus. They stress how the Word of God through John demands to be listened to in the real circumstances of life.

The Founding Josephite document of 1868 named this John as a Congregational Patron, and seemingly as part of the extended Holy Family, giving him a 'J' on the Monogram. Then in Ch. 2.5 of the Constitutions under revision there is a brief but telling reminder that imitating John's "*continued conversion of heart*" and "*prophetic witness of life*" is integral to our Josephite identity.

As Jesus did with the Pharisees in Matt 23, John 'does not mince his words' amongst those who gather around to hear what God is saying through him. 'Calling a spade a spade', he rages

"You snakes and sons of snakes! Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our ancestor!" Matt 3:7-9.



John preaches in the mode of earlier prophets, like Amos in Ch. 5-6. Not a future-predictor, but a 'forth-teller,' a truth teller, he denounces the scandalous gap between the way his people claim connection with God's promises and the way they treat each other. He challenges them not to 'name-drop' about God, but to put their religion into practice in ways befitting their proud bloodline in faith.

In the light of tragic circumstances staring us in the face today in Church, world and society, Advent urges us to consider John's sharp critique of the injustices he sees. The gist of his challenge is as real for us as it was for people in his day.

*If you have food and clothing, share them with those who have none;
don't force anything from others they shouldn't have to give you;
don't bully people with threats and manipulation. cf Luke 3: 10-14.*

In scriptural Word ever new, John demands we stay alert to what is happening around us and to respond full-heartedly as if it really matters to us. In this, John is like Elie Wiesel, a modern Jewish philosopher-prophet, who, in the light of the Holocaust kept challenging the world to be conscious and not silent about speaking for justice where people's lives need supporting and protecting. He wrote:

*"Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil.
The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.
Because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies."*ⁱⁱ

We do need voices that wake us from indifference and incite us to act in responsiveness to issues arising that are incompatible with our sense of what is loving, truthful, compassionate, and just. There

are Sisters among us who stand against human trafficking, injustice towards Australian indigenous and Māori communities, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, abused women and children, the sick and the elderly, homeless persons and those living with disabilities, and neighbours suffering political and ecological struggles in West Papua, Timor Leste and across Oceania. We see and feel the pain of peoples suffering in any of the societies in which we live and work, and especially at this time across Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and their neighbours.

Do we ever show support for Sisters who act consciously against indifference? Perhaps expressing support for someone else's action is the only way we can show that we too are not indifferent. Then it is well to ask ourselves if we pray for and with those suffering when we cannot be more tangibly involved? Do we actually believe that praying counts? Do we believe in the 'whispers of God in our own hearts and spirits,' as Mother Mary reminds us? How fully conscious are we that the Spirit of God lives and acts within us, groaning in birth pangs as all creation comes to fulfilment in God? [cf Rom 8:15ff].

In Congregational life we have every encouragement to be aware of the Spirit resonating in us as we practice *lectio divina*, and share conversations styled in *contemplative dialogue*, rather than in argumentative, competitive exchanges. How well do we let the Spirit speak and be heard among us?

In *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue reminds us of the power of our own God-given imagination and creativity in finding the depth of God's Self-Revealing Word within us. He writes:

*"Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament - a visible sign of invisible grace.
Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access to (God's) Mysterium...
"As an artist, the human person is permanently active in this revelation
[of God's own Self within the human person].
The imagination is the great friend of the unknown.
Endlessly, it invokes and releases the power of possibility."iii*

Walter Brueggemann, scholar of prophetic literature, once wrote from something of the same wisdom in his work, And Finally Comes the Poet:

*"Those whom the ancient Israelites called prophets, the equally ancient Greeks called poets.
The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility."iv*

Brueggemann is supported in this by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

*God needs prophets in order to make himself known, and all prophets are necessarily artistic.
What a prophet has to say can never be said in prose.v*

Let us conclude with a Christmas thought about the prophetic-poetic power of imagination from Madeleine L'Engle, as she reflects on God's living Word heard and heeded in Mary of Nazareth.

"The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth giver. In a very real sense the artist (male or female) should be like Mary who, when the angel told her that she was to bear the Messiah, was obedient to the command... I believe that each work of art, whether it is a work of great genius, or something very

small, comes to the artist and says, "Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me." And the artist either says, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses; but the obedient response is not necessarily a conscious one, and not everyone has the humble, courageous obedience of Mary. As for Mary, she was little more than a child when the angel came to her; she had not lost her child's creative acceptance of the realities moving on the other side of the everyday world. We lose our ability to see angels as we grow older, and that is a tragic loss."^{vi}

So let us be prophets of responsiveness and active agents against indifference. Let us be alert to 'angels' [Grk *euangelion* for 'good news']. They bring the good news of God's Word in us. Let us also be birth-givers as artist-prophets in faithfulness to the Gospel and our Constitutions.

Invitation to pray contemplatively and be in contemplative dialogue
with Deuteronomy 30: 11-14; 19.

What I enjoin on you today is not beyond your strength or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven,
so that you need to wonder,

"Who will go up to heaven for us & bring it down to us, so that we may hear it & keep it?"

Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder,

"Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so we may hear it and keep it?"

No, the Word is very near to you, it is already in your mouth and in your heart
so that you can put it into practice...

Today, I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse.

Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live.

Stained glass window of John from Lochinvar chapel.
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ⁱⁱ Elie Weisel, [US News and World Report, Oct 27th, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anam Cara, p 15

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p.4.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*