

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

2 Kings 2:

22nd September 2019

Spirit... more than a force may you be a movement... more than a word, may you be an idea... more than a promise, may you be the truth... alive in us... and disturbing us into faith... so be it... Amen

When you wake up tomorrow... and turn on the radio... it might seem a little quieter... perhaps a little less argumentative... less interruption even... because John Humphries... presenter on Radio 4's flagship Today programme... has retired...

I don't know if this will bring you sadness or joy... perhaps Zoe Ball on Radio Two is your preferred voice with your morning coffee... so what's the fuss... And in the interests of fairness... let me say... other Radio Stations are also available...

In the middle of the bundle of last interviews John Humphries led on Thursday... between Tony Blair, David Cameron and Dame Edna Everage... and at times how knew who was who... was thought for the day... led by Jonathan Sacks... retired chief Rabbi... And while much of the programme could be a bit of a love-in... during his reflection... Rabbi Sacks compare Mr Humphries to an Old Testament prophet...

Interesting as John Humphries coined the phrase "In God we Doubt"... but it did set the mind thinking... about that peculiar and unique role... the Old Testament prophets have in our faith... Unlike Mr Humphries... they never made the headlines in their lifetimes... they were arrested... flogged... abused... but they were the world's first social critics... They were the first to stand up and confront what society was doing... and be the voice that called the community to rethink the path they were on...

Perhaps radio interviewers can especially do that... if leaders make themselves available to be interviewed... perhaps the scrutinising of those who lead our society is what our broadcasting at its best might do... Without social media... Elisha... the prophet we are re-imagining this morning... and his compatriots... was the enduring... challenging... corrective voice behind the moral choices of both Judaism... and thus Christianity...

The core of our message... when our faith speaks best... and is at its most enduring... and its most relevant... is when it follows the tradition... of Elisha... Elijah... Isaiah... Jeremiah... Hosea... and the prophets... when the faith challenges that which becomes the norm in society... when God's People refuse to take for granted that society... especially when it loses contact with its moral foundations... making the poor poorer... creation just an economic resource... and in both instances reducing all our humanity...

That is when the faith becomes faithful... when the prophetic voice is prophetic...

There is something we need to get right about prophecy... and it is very clear in the Old Testament... it has no interest in predicting the future... Prophets aren't diviners or soothsayers... Faith has little time for them...

Indeed the prophets hope they've got the future wrong... Their claim is if you keep going the way you are... then society will fail... When you lose the truth... you lose trust... and when you lose trust... the fabric frays... as Jonathan Sacks said on Thursday morning...

But the core and essential point of a prophetic voice is that the future is not pre-scripted... It is an invitation to make different choices... If the prediction of a shaman comes true... it has succeeded... If a prophecy comes true... society has failed... The prophet tells the truth of what will happen if we do not shift our balance of morality... Elisha and his colleagues do not predict... They warn... Heed the danger... they say...

There is a book called 'The Wisdom of Crowds'... and the author tells the story of the American naturalist William Beebe who found a group of blind army ants... moving in a circle... They went round and round for two days in the same circle... until most of them dropped dead...

Apparently... when a group of army ants get separated from its colony... there is only one simple rule they obey... follow the ant in front of you... but if the ant in front of you is lost... you are too...

The author's point was... we need dissenting voices... To stand apart... to question where the group is going... and the conventional wisdom... resisting what is fashionable

and populist... is the task of the prophet... and what they question... what they are always calling to account... is our moral connection with each other...

While some believe in social Darwinism... that only the fittest survive... and the weak inevitably perish... the prophets shout loudest against that...

That does not need to be the case... A moral society does not allow that to happen...

There is a seriously corrupt form of morality that suggests having power... is a fundamental to the survival of our society... The prophets disparage that... Power... was secondary to the prophets... What mattered was righteousness... Even for God... God's righteousness was far more important... than any idea of power... It is about the kind of relationship we have with each other... it is always about relationships...

If you were unfaithful to God... then it was certain that you would be unfaithful to your neighbours... If a society can't be faithful to that which provides its moral compass and its compassion... then it would never be faithful to its last and least... The strength of any community... congregation... society... nation... is not its power... its military... its demographics... but its morality... If you keep faith to your foundational morality... in our case to the narrative of God... then you will keep faith to each other...

When you lose the connection to those foundational values... you lose connection with each other... Your society... your community... your religion... that which gives you meaning... unravels... and that is the prophet's warning...

And while none of that comes particularly from the story we have this morning of Elisha... perhaps one part is fundamental... the act of passing on the mantel... This rich tradition in the bible... is not lost... It is very vocal still... and perhaps we are at our most relevant and challenging when we speak collectively with that prophetic voice...

This is where we stand apart... and have a dissenting voice... when we see the connection untangling between our morality and the way we shape society... It is what defines how we live as a congregation... why we do the things we do from guilds and mens association to daybreak and festivals...

Our voice is not always spoken... often it is louder when it is lived out... We model how our foundational ethic is connected to how we live... we become that which keeps connecting us to our morals...

When that breaks... we have lost the deep connect between how we live as a society... and our core values...

But that is not how we live here... We live continually challenging our own ethic... We shape a faith here... that constantly challenges us... calls into question what we habitually do... institutionally and personally... It is the kind of faith we have here... comfortable with questions... familiar with the challenges... accustomed to resetting the conventions... It doesn't mean these conventions are wrong... but it focusses them to always reconnect us... reimagine who we are...

And that... according to Richard Rohr... the catholic leader in spirituality... is what leads us to be able to choose a different future... The prophets say... the future is not inevitable... it is always contingent upon our cooperation, choices, and actions... Nothing is fixed... living in the prophetic imagination... is the gift of the church to our communities and nation... and more than just re-imagining it... modelling it in this community... living in that way towards each other...

We maybe don't get on to radio 4 but that is what we do... this is our faith... when we pick up the prophetic mantel...

Shall we?