

Telling it like it is

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42

In Christian circles I have learned, over the years, whenever someone starts a conversation with the words from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, "If I may speak the truth in love..." you generally know to duck. Something hard-hitting, difficult, or unwelcome is generally going to be lobbed into the conversation.

We all have them, friends or family or colleagues at work, who are not backward in coming forward. Who will get to the point, pleasantly or unpleasantly, telling us what they think, whether they're right or wrong, and unafraid of the consequences. It can sometimes lead to an uneasy relationship, but to have those people in our lives who will tell us like it is, is more often a blessing than it is a curse.

People who tell it like it is. People who see what is right, and what is wrong, in the world, in life, in the big picture, in the small details, and call it out. Annoying, unsettling, but often necessary.

It's not always done through anger, but often when there is a sense of injustice, or when there is a frustration that a process or a situation is not right, then a person with a degree of courage will speak out and speak up. Our attention is drawn to whatever it is, and then we have the decision to address it, or ignore it, and live with whatever the consequences may be.

In Bible terms, we can sometimes call such people prophets. Their prophecy is not necessarily about foretelling the future. Very often it is about stating the obvious about what is going on in the world of their day, that people could not see, or had chosen to ignore. The prophets of the Old Testament, often speaking with a poetic voice, have things to say that are powerful, unsettling

and buoyant because they have the imagination to say it like it is, and make people aware what was going on around them, and what needed to be addressed.

Many of the Old Testament prophets spoke around the time of 587 BC, when the temple in Jerusalem was burned, the holy city was destroyed, the line kings stretching back to David was terminated, and the leading citizens deported into exile. The people had turned away from God, now God, for a time, withdrew from the people and let them face the consequences of their actions.

One of the prophets, Jeremiah, feels called to tell it like it is to his generation. His review of God is robust. A God not bound by creeds or conventions or tied to the royal temple and establishment. A God who speaks and challenges and makes for awkwardness because this God has been hurt by a disobedient people who have broken their promises. A God Who is passionate and complex as Jeremiah's words try to describe and encapsulate Who this God is, what this God wants, and why this God matters.

The God Jeremiah talks about comes as a shock to people today. We may think that God all there is to know about God has been settled, and nothing left open. A God Who has been tamed by time, and made familiar by our cosy way of engagement. Whereas God is passionate, dangerous and imaginative, as well as loving, caring and healing. God is not available to us on our terms, but on God's terms.

When Jeremiah says it like it is, his vision is of a God who has a sense of the large public issues. God cares for individuals and community. God, through the prophet, even cares for the king of that time, Zedekiah, who did not listen to God, and cared enough to speak the dangerous truth – which is there are consequences to actions.

The God Jeremiah speak about also challenges religious conventions. In our reading there is another prophet, Hananiah. Not a bad man, but he misses the point God is making. Hananiah prophesied a positive message, an easier time ahead, something that the people wanted to hear. Jeremiah contradicted this.

The problem posed is, how were the people to know what to believe. When two very different messages sounded equally true, when they had all the marks and credentials that would have led people to believe that they were trustworthy, how did you know which one was true? Both purported to come from God. What was God saying?

It is no different for us today. When we look at the future of the Church. Are we to plan a future that is sustainable and sensible, recognising that the Church is no longer what it was, though still with something to say and do in our world today. Or are we to put our trust in God, and build and plan for growth? Both are plausible, but which one is what God is saying to us today?

Or in the world of politics. Do we support the Prime Minister's 'stop the boats' campaign as a means to tackle the iniquitous actions of human traffickers who extort money from desperate individuals who are seeking asylum. Do we support the Rwandan option that seeks to send asylum seekers to a country not deemed to be a safe country by the High Court, a judgement challenged by the Government. Or do we believe that such a policy is inhumane, unjust, and prejudicial to the human rights of vulnerable individuals who had good cause to flee their home country?

Or in the debate about the environment. Do we support the reduction of use in gas and oil, and in the banning of petrol cars, and in the encouragement of wind farms as the best way ahead for a sustainable and greener future, and realise the longer this is put off, the more damaged our fragile world becomes? Or do we realise that by doing any or all of these things people's jobs are

at risk, the infrastructure for green energy in homes, transport and so on is simply not there, and the cost is likely to be exorbitant?

What do we do when we are faced by people who believe that they are telling it like it is? How should we decide?

In the olden days at school, when hard questions were asked, all you needed to do was to turn to the back of the book and find the answers there. Do that with the Bible and you get the Book of Revelation, and good luck with getting answers from that!

Some years back one of our members here said to me, "Will you just tell me what to believe, spell it out, and it'll be all right with me." Only to realise that some of the things spelled out were not things the person wanted to agree with, and that the black and white answers they longed for did not exist. Yes, there are some churches and other faith groups who believe they have all the answers and make adherence to their interpretation of those answers a matter of discipline. The role of women in church life. The issue of abortion, or assisted dying or same sex relationships, or how you spend your money. Or the male as the unchallenged head of the household. Is that really what you want?

What do we do when we are faced by people who believe that they are telling it like it is? How should we decide? Never mind Jeremiah and Amos and Isaiah. What should be our response to modern time prophets. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough, Bob Geldoff, Ursula Von Der Leyen, Malala Yousafzai? Dead or alive, each one of them, and many others, say something jagged, unsettling, compelling into the way we live our lives today on issues that touch every part of our existence. The prophets are still amongst us – the large names, and the everyday ones who see and notice and speak up and speak out. What do we do when we crave for comfort and security but at the expense of announcing the cost of

peace with justice? When all we want is a settled life and ease, when the world we live in calls for radical hope and action. How do we address, in faith, the tragic gap...the gap between what is and what could and should be?

In the end we have to make up our own mind, with the help of others, and forge what we believe to be God's way ahead for our times. And some of those others may be prophets, like those of old, seeing things as they really are, telling things like they really are, and calling us with our wits and compassion about us, to respond, and do something.

"Discerning the truth is not an easy matter, especially since we are so prone to be influenced by what we already want or what we think will serve our interests."ⁱ But discerning that truth, bridging those gaps in society between what is fair and what is unfair, will be the means by which our broken and messy communities find their way closer to the realm God has longed for from the very beginning.ⁱⁱ

People of faith who tell it like it is disturb the security of church and the world only because they themselves are not too secure in their belief that they have the whole answer of God. But they have heard something, and they need to say it. They've seen something, and they know they have to point it out to others.

Their work, and our work is to speak out and to speak up. Their work, and our work, is to address in however small away the things that are not right, and work as hard as we can to make things better.

Jesus says the prophets will be rewarded for their work. He likened their work to the good people who give even a cup of cold water to the thirsty ones of our world. Maybe that's what speaking out, speaking up, acting out and acting up is all about: recognising the thirst in our world for justice, compassion, and peace, and through our faith, giving that cup of cold water.

It's a start.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Rachel Sophia Baard, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3*, 174

ⁱⁱ Trace Haythorn, *ibid*