I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.

Last week Jane spoke of prophecy, prophets can be anyone. An organist dressed up as Yasser Arafat, a lady with a mobile phone, a teacher, a farmer, a mechanic. Anyone and everyone may speak with God’s voice. But I hope Jane won’t mind me saying that there was one kind of prophet she didn’t mention, and that is the false prophet. Amos says, I am no prophet, or a prophet’s son. I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.

I am no prophet - Amos was distancing himself from the most common form of prophet of his day. The yes men. The hired lackeys who tell the king what he wants to hear. The professionals who know which side of their bread is buttered. False prophets.

Those who say what the powerful want to hear were there then and they’re still here today. Only when they fall from grace do you hear what they really think.

Some context might help. In Amos’ day, about 750 years before Jesus was born, Israel had attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never seen before. The country had a strong army and enjoyed economic affluence. People believed this was a sign of God’s favour, gained not least through their extravagant support of the official shrines. Shrines run by the professional prophets who made sure the king heard what he wanted to hear.

Into that complacency stepped Amos, speaking harsh words to a smooth season. He denounced the injustice and corruption of the elite, he spoke of God’s anger that the rich were getting richer and the poor getting poorer. He raged against hypocrisy and false dealing. He reserved a special hatred for the false religion that was self-serving and seduced by power.

His vision of the plumb line is effective. You use a plumb line to show what is straight and true, whether you’re hanging wallpaper or building a wall, the plumb line is a tool that hasn’t changed for thousands of years. This is straight and true – revealing that Israel’s life was bent and crooked.

So Amos rages against the high places, the official religion that favoured the rich, the false prophets who spoke smooth words to the powerful. Amos wasn’t one of them. He was an ordinary bloke, doing an ordinary job, and God chose him to speak for truth.

The true voice of prophecy usually goes against the grain. So it was with John the Baptist. If anything reveals his authority and credentials as a prophet it is the opposition he aroused. And the price he paid.

So it is also with the prophet from Nazareth – no stranger to hostility and rejection.

I remember when I had been a Vicar for just a few months. The parish had been vacant for a very long time. Most people had worked with generosity and grace and the church had thrived. But there was one person who was a bully. They used the time to build their own little empire and everyone learned that resistance was futile.

One day it became clear that there needed to be a showdown and the post service coffee turned into the gunfight at the OK corral. It ended with a set of keys being thrown to the floor, keys the person wasn’t meant to have had in the first place, and a slammed door – which didn’t quite work because it had an automatic closer on it.

A few weeks later I was at a gathering of new vicars. Those in their first parishes. A wise old Roman Catholic priest asked us a question – in your first six months, he asked, who has had a row with someone? I rather shamefacedly raised my hand. I was the only one. “Good,” he said, “if you haven’t upset someone in your first six months you’re probably not doing your job.”

He didn’t mean it was a good thing to generally upset people for the sake of it, what he meant was that if you are being prophetic then you will find yourself challenging people. You will find yourself asking difficult questions. You will find yourself saying hard things to situations which need to change. You will find a voice which some will reject.

As Jesus said, blessed are you when men (and women) revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The voice of prophecy, which is a voice every Christian must sometimes speak with, is a voice that goes against the grain.

Prophecy has two directions. The first is to hold the plumb line – to check how things are, to know if things are straight and true, to read the signs of the times, to understand what is going on. The second is see where the present takes us. So Amos predicted that a corrupt, self-satisfied and unjust society would implode. And he was right.

It is a message repeated over and over again generation after generation. In the Bible the voice of the prophets is always unpopular, always rejected, always ignored. And it is always, always right.

The irony is that the lesson is never learned. Listen to the hard words. Hear the message that is uncomfortable. Stick with the voice you don’t want to listen to. Because the voice of prophecy is essential to our well-being and happiness.

That might seem strange to say because the voice of prophecy is uncompromising and uncomfortable. But who would you rather go to – the doctor that tells you all is well and there’s nothing to worry about, or the doctor who tells you the truth and what can be done?

Smooth words that do not disturb might be nice, but the truth is better for us.