Ezekiel 2:1-5

Mark 6:1-13

A prophet

What is a prophet? What does a prophet look like? How do you imagine a prophet?

A bit like this? Male. Long flowing robes and headdress? Perhaps with a stick for walking long distances in the desert?

Or like this? Female. Smartly dressed? With a mobile phone in her hand?

Yes. What is a prophet? What does a prophet look like? How do you imagine a prophet?

Wikipedia tells us that *a prophet is an individual who is regarded as being in contact with a divine being and is said to speak on behalf of that being, serving as an intermediary with humanity by delivering messages or teachings from the supernatural source to other people.*

And what does the Bible say?

Well, every time there is Morning Prayer we say the words of the Benedictus, which actually come from Luke 1. They are the words of Zechariah at the time of the circumcision of his son, John, as he looks forward to what God has in store for him. He says this:

*And you child will be called the prophet of the most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.*

So John the Baptist, as his baby son went on to become, was called by God to *prepare the way of the Lord* and to *give knowledge of salvation to his people*.

Can we perhaps use that as a Biblical definition of a prophet – someone who is *called by God to prepare the way of the Lord and to give knowledge of salvation to his people?*

Have you noticed that, nowhere in these definitions, either in Wikipedia or the Bible, does it say that a prophet needs to be of a certain gender or age, or to have certain qualifications, or to wear certain clothing or carry other items in order to be a prophet?

So who can be a prophet?

Well …. in my recent sermons, I have spoken about a lot about God’s grace, about his unconditional love for us. There was Acts 2:21 which reminded us that *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,* and there was the message of John 3:17 that *God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved*. As I said at the time, both of these passages are really challenging, because they are not simply intended to make us feel comfortable and self-satisfied about our relationship with God. These passages are also intended to remind us of our calling to live lives which bring glory to God and reflect his gracious love for us, by in turn showing our unconditional love to everyone.

With that in mind … let me suggest to you this morning that, in our own ways, all of us, each and every one of us, is a *prophet of the most High*. Yes, we are **all** called *prepare the way of the Lord* and to *give knowledge of salvation to his people.*

What a scary thought, don’t you think? What is your immediate reaction? Really? Even me? I wouldn’t know what to do or say. No-one would listen to me. I’m not good at that sort of thing. All sorts of self-doubts come into our minds. This is quite natural, because we are well aware that being prophet brings with it many responsibilities and challenges, and that those responsibilities and challenges are enormous and very daunting.

And I have to say that our two Bible readings this morning don’t at first glance seem to do anything to make us any less daunted by the enormity of the task ahead, but let’s all the same have a look at them now, and see if we can perhaps derive comfort or strength or encouragement from them for us on the way ahead as *prophets of the most High.*

In our Old Testament reading, we hear the words of God as he calls the prophet Ezekiel, and sends him out to speak to the people of Israel.

First of all, in verse 1, God tells Ezekiel to *stand up on [his] feet,* and then, in verse 2, we are told that a *spirit entered into [him] and set [him] on his feet*. It sounds to me as if Ezekiel found it quite hard to stand up on his own – and that he needed God’s help, through the spirit, to find the strength to do it. This is not just about standing up rather than sitting down of course. This is surely an image which reminds us of how difficult it can be for all of us at times to motivate ourselves to do something, especially something as challenging or scary as speaking out about what we believe, and how we often cannot do it in our strength alone.

In verses 3 and 4, God then speaks to Ezekiel of the challenge ahead, of the sort of people God is sending him amongst. The people have *rebelled against [God]*, and *transgressed*, we are told. They are *impudent* and *stubborn*. They have clearly not only turned away from God, but also become very set in their ways, unwilling to listen to God’s message. God doesn’t paint an attractive picture of these people, and we can imagine Ezekiel’s heart sinking as he realises the enormity of his task. Ezekiel lived in the 6th century BC, but the world in which we live today is not that very different from the one he knew. The people of our day are also mostly very set in their ways, and unwilling to listen to the message of God’s love for them.

So perhaps we also need to listen to God’s words of advice to Ezekiel in verse 5 when he tells him that *whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them*. God is calling on Ezekiel to make his mark, to make sure that he makes an impression, to make sure that the people get a chance to hear his message, even if they choose not to listen to what he has to say.

As Christians here in Mid-Cheshire in 2021, we too are called to make our mark, to make sure that people get a chance to hear the message, even if they seem to reject it. We, like Ezekiel, are simply sowing the seed. We may well never know whether it takes root and flourishes or not, but we can make sure that they know that *there has been a prophet among them*.

The message of this passage is surely just the sort of encouragement which we were looking for? It will not be easy – we knew that of course - but we don’t have to do it in our own strength, because we have the Holy Spirit alongside us every step of the way, and then all we have to do is sow the seed, and leave the rest to God.

And what about our New Testament reading?

Well, in our gospel reading from Mark 6, we hear firstly about the ministry of Jesus himself and then about his instructions to his disciples as he sends them out to teach among the villages.

In verses 1-5, we follow Jesus as he returns to Nazareth, and preaches in his home synagogue. Again, Jesus’ experience reminds us that it will not be easy. His friends and neighbours, who have known him since he was a boy, growing up as the son of Joseph the carpenter, are *astounded*, we are told, to hear him preaching to them, and they *take offence*. Not only do they not recognise him for who he is, the Son of God, the Messiah, but neither are they prepared to listen to what he has to say, because they see him as an arrogant upstart, who has gone up in the world, and become too big for his boots.

This reaction seems to take even Jesus by surprise, because we are told that he is *amazed at their unbelief,* although St Mark, as the narrator, seems less shocked, as he reflects on how difficult it often is to get true recognition from those closest to you, saying that *prophets are not without honour, except in their home town*.

This is certainly something which we need to hear and to understand, as we think about our calling to be *prophets of the most High*. Our best opportunities to talk about our faith, and the good news of gospel, are going to be with the people whom we come into contact with the most – our families and our neighbours and our work colleagues – and yet we could, like Jesus himself, be *amazed* at their reaction, because they could, like the people of Nazareth, be *astounded* and take offence, wondering who we think we are. This is something which we need to be prepared for.

Then, in verses 7-11, Jesus sends out his disciples into the surrounding villages with his message of repentance and reconciliation with God. It is interesting to note that he sends them out in pairs. In some ways, it would have been more efficient to send them out alone, so that they could cover a wider area, but Jesus knows that they may well face rejection and opposition. By travelling together, they will be able to strengthen and encourage each other. We too, as we set out to talk to people about the gospel, may face rejection and opposition - we have already thought about that – but we can look to our Christian brothers and sisters for support and encouragement. We can work as a team, sharing experiences, both good and bad, and offering advice and reassurance when it is needed. As we serve God, there is no need for us to try to go it alone.

So what does being a prophet in 21st century mid-Cheshire look like? It’s certainly not about wandering from village to village wearing sandals and carrying a staff. For most of us, neither is it about standing up in church and preaching to large groups of people. We are simply called to give people the message about God’s love for them, and to prepare the way for him to come and work in their lives.

There are so many ways of communicating with people these days. If you want to write to someone, there are emails and text messages and Facebook posts and tweets on Twitter, as well as letters and cards, and if you want to speak to someone there is Facetime and Zoom and such like, although you can’t beat a chat with your neighbour over the back fence, or amongst the fruit and vegetables in Sainsburys.

And then there is all the non-verbal communication. *Actions speak louder than words* they say, don’t they? The kind gift of a freshly-cooked meal to someone who has been recently bereaved, a few hours baby-sitting to allow an exhausted single parent to get break, a lift in the car to a hospital appointment. And there are many more possibilities of course.

So yes, it will not always be easy to be a prophet – it never has been – and there will discouraging moments, and criticism, and setbacks, but, as our reading from Ezekiel reminds us, God gives us strength for the task, both through the Holy Spirit, and our fellow Christians, and he merely calls us to make sure that *they know that there has been a prophet among them*. He will do the rest.

Listen to the words of Isaiah 6, paraphrased into a well-known modern hymn by Dan Schutte.

*I, The Lord Of Sea And Sky,
I Have Heard My People Cry.
All Who Dwell In Dark And Sin,
My Hand Will Save.*

 *I Who Made The Stars Of Night,
I Will Make Their Darkness Bright.
Who Will Bear My Light To Them?
Whom Shall I Send?*

*Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?
I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.
I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.
I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.*

Amen