

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Prophets are a prickly lot. And in an age like ours that prizes comfort, therapy and amiability prophets are hard to relate to. Its hard to make friends with someone who is difficult or rebarbative. Just as it is hard to relax in company that is puritanical or lacking in joy. Most normal human beings gravitate to others who either share or at least tolerate their peccadilloes. By contrast, people who actively seek out people who will criticize them are highly unusual.

But is this last group of unusual people to whom the prophets belong. Prophets have no interest in gaining a following or influence. Rather, the prophets exist to criticize, and in turn be criticized. Long before literary criticism perfected the art of how to have a good argument, the prophets were there, inciting and stirring people up.

One of the misconceptions about the prophets is that they are people who tell the future. But it is not the future that the prophets are really concerned about. Their remit is instead with the present, and specifically, announcing in the here and now just how bad things are. In the scriptures the prophets' role was to open the eyes and ears of a people who were blind and deaf to injustice and inequity. While it is true that they also tell of better times to come, these better times are always defined in contrast to the status quo. What makes the prophets special, then, is that they are willing to take the risk of not fitting in, for the sake of the truth.

John the Baptist was certainly a dab hand at not fitting in. From his clothing to his dietary choices everything about John screams oddness. And yet in Matthew we hear that crowds were drawn to this strange man with his strange pronouncements.

One wonders how real those crowds were. Did they really number, as we are told, many Pharisees and Saducees? Or is the crowd more of a metaphorical device to remind us that what John was saying was important, and to be taken seriously? It might be a reasonable expectation for a group to gather so that they could mock and take issue with someone as strange as John. But in this case the crowd is apparently gathered to take John seriously.

The crowd's presence speaks volumes about people's readiness to hear from the likes of John. He is simply the most recent in a long line of prophets calling people to return to God, and to change their way of life. On the one hand John's message is a consistent and recurring theme in the Hebrew scriptures. And yet on the other, as the existence of the crowd reminds us, it was still unusual to actually be able to hear that message for oneself.

Isaiah beautifully anticipates and sets the stage for John, with all the talk of a wolf lying with a lamb, the lion and the fatling together. But all these tender and harmonious natural images can tend to blind us to what is actually their quite revolutionary message. Isaiah is saying not only shall violence and competition no longer be the order of the day. Rather, all that is natural, all the relationships that we take for granted, all shall be transformed for the better.

One of the questions for us this Advent seems to me whether or not we are ready to hear Isaiah and John's words. Ironically, the prophet or revolutionary in one age becomes the establishment figure in the next. And just as one of the best ways to marginalize someone can be to ensure that they are feted as a part of the establishment, so revering a prophet like John as a saint can be a sure-fire way of making sure he is ignored.

And so as we remember John this Advent, we need to ask whether we are really ready to hear him? Are we prepared to let him get under our skin like the prickly prophet he was? Or do we see him simply as a regrettable but necessary pit stop in the race that inevitably leads to Christmas?

Each of us will have a different take on what it means to let John get under our skin. But I want to suggest that we listen to his call to repentance. True, it is not a fashionable word. In fact, in our wonderfully litigious society it is heresy to suggest that we ourselves might ever need to admit fault. Fault, we are told, is something that always belongs to others. But that was not how John saw it.

John minces no words in telling his audience that they have to shape up. Even those who claim Abraham as their ancestor have to remember that actions flow from faith, and that faith without actions is hollow. In the same way, today we have to ask whether our actions really flow out of our faith. It is no good invoking the name of Jesus if we ignore the needy or side with the wicked. Similarly, it is no good celebrating Advent if we are not prepared to do our part to help our society be fairer and more honest.

And this is where we need to think about what the Root of Jesse really means. Isaiah predicts that a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and it is this that our reading from Romans refers to. In 1706 a certain Matthew Henry commented that the word root refers to could actually be better translated as a sprig or a twig. While a root sounds relatively robust and grounded, a sprig signifies fragility, but also potential. It is, of course, also something that might get broken.

Today as we ponder our own place within these stories from scripture, we need to hold on to those images of a twig or a sprig. They remind us that nothing is inevitable. God's works may succeed or fail. But for God to succeed, we need to acknowledge that we are like the Root of Jesse. We too have a role to play. Each of us is a tender, fragile, offshoot planted by God. And as plants need water, nutrition and sunshine, so do we.

The season of Advent gives us time to tend to and nourish our own roots. And we need to care for our rooted-ness even though we may not see or understand it. Not that this is about self-care for the sake of our own identity. Rather nurturing our roots is about us doing the work of God by working for justice and truth. Only by being rooted in God's love and forgiveness can each of us bring the fruits of God's love to others. Like John we are now part of the family tree that Isaiah predicts will transform the world. And if we dare not share God's love and forgiveness in our communities, then who will? Amen.