

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

By GEORGE W. MACRAE

AND the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah'. In the artful simplicity of the Jonah story we find an instructive picture – almost a caricature – of the prophetic experience. Among the great prophets, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the experience reached its heights; but in real life the lines are rarely so clearly and simply drawn as they can be in a story. It will be useful, therefore, to preface our reflections on the correlatives of divine vocation and mission in the Old Testament prophets with a closer look at Jonah. The main purpose of this didactic story was to counteract the growing tendency among the jews after the exile to restrict God's saving will to the jewish people alone. Against this selfish particularism, the author of Jonah recalls the universality of the will of God by recounting the entertaining adventures of a prophet.

'The word of the Lord came to Jonah' – the typical formula of the prophetic books – commissioning him to preach repentance to the great pagan city of Nineveh, which was to the jews a symbol of the oppressive might of old. But Jonah felt no attraction to the rigorous calling of the prophet, or at least to this particular prophetic mission. He rose to flee from the presence of Yahweh, and to the opposite end of the earth from Nineveh. More than one prophet in Israel's history had felt an instinctive reluctance to accept his divine vocation, but all had been compelled by Yahweh in one way or another. For Jonah this compulsion took a spectacular form. He took passage on a ship, but Yahweh 'hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up'. The captain and crew learned that the storm was on Jonah's account. Having tried everything else, they threw Jonah overboard according to his own suggestion; the storm immediately ceased and the sailors became converts to Yahweh. Jonah had already been used, in spite of himself, for part of the mission to the pagans for which he had been chosen.

It was then that Yahweh 'appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah', and the reluctant prophet spent three days and nights in the

belly of the fish before it regurgitated him on land at the command of Yahweh. By this time Jonah clearly felt the urgency of the mission Yahweh had given him. When the word of the Lord came to him a second time with the same command, 'Jonah arose and went to Nineveh'. He prophesied there the destruction God had planned for the evil city, and the city was converted instantaneously. From the king down to the very animals, all did penance; and Nineveh was spared.

The story goes on to relate how Jonah, a querulous as well as a rebellious prophet, was graphically made to see the workings of God's limitless mercy for men. We need not follow the story further here, except perhaps to remark that even Jonah's querulousness is reminiscent of some of the classical prophets, though still a caricature. No one would call Amos or Ezekiel a loveable figure either. Perhaps the very character of the prophetic mission evoked less-than-endearing qualities from those it called. Or perhaps we should take comfort in the reflection that God uses imperfect human personalities for very exalted missions.

In the almost over-drawn lines of this diverting tale, the Jewish reader recognised in outline the role of the prophet: a man of God, the recipient of a personal vocation from Yahweh, to which he often responded reluctantly out of a sense of unworthiness or inadequacy for the exacting task. Once compelled by the power of God, the prophet embarked on the mission of communicating the word of God to Israel or to the nations; he preached repentance, preparation for the day of the Lord. He often met with opposition from all sides (a feature which the writer of the idealised prophecy of Jonah suppresses). The Christian reader can find still more: he will see in the prophecies the work of preparation for Christ's coming, not only in the message of repentance or the never-ending effort to purify the worship of God of all that tends to naturalise it, but also in the personal calling of the prophet – his 'being sent' by God to proclaim the word and to suffer in his role of mediator.

From the clear-cut lines of the imaginary prophetic experience of Jonah, we may now turn to the vocation of the prophets themselves. And this means to turn first to the personality that dominates almost the whole of the Old Testament, Moses. He was the prototype of the prophet as God's spokesman *par excellence*; and also his special commission from God was a paradigm of the call of the prophet.¹

¹ Cf W. J. O'Rourke, S.J., 'Moses and the Prophetic Vocation' *Scripture* 15 (1963) pp. 44-55.

The first of the two accounts of the vocation of Moses is the older, and the more circumstantial by far.¹ It portrays Moses as a shepherd who receives his call from Yahweh in the burning bush. 'The place on which you are standing is holy ground': several details conspire to emphasise the particular sanctity of the occasion. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob identifies himself, reveals that he has determined to deliver his people from their affliction, and announces his purpose to Moses: 'Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt'. Then begins a dialogue, of protestations of unworthiness on the part of Moses, and reassurances on the part of Yahweh.

The distinguishing feature of the mission of Moses, as of all the prophets, is that God guides them in an intimate manner. They are sent, not to do the work of man, but to act as spokesmen for God, to communicate his words, to accomplish his will. Moses' objections may be thought naive in the light of Yahweh's assurance of divine guidance; but what he doubted was precisely his ability to be the channel of God's action in the world. The sanctity of the occasion emphasised in the opening of the scene is not forgotten as Moses protests, but it explains his reluctance. Even Jonah was portrayed as fully aware that whatever the prophet would seem to accomplish would in reality be the divine achievement. Curiously piqued at the success of his mission, Jonah explained: 'That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful . . .'²

Moses was sent by God – the word *send* recurs as a refrain throughout the account – on a far greater mission than the material deliverance of the israelites from their servitude. We know that he was to be the lawgiver, the revealer of the identity of God: the founder, in a word, of the religion of Israel. The consciousness, no matter how obscure, of the far-reaching consequences of his leadership, of his role as mediator, was responsible for Moses' overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Perhaps also he foresaw the obstinacy he would have to try to overcome, for he repeatedly throws up the disbelief of the people as an obstacle. The people will want to know the name of the God of their fathers who sent Moses, and Yahweh reveals his name. The people will demand proof, and Yahweh empowers Moses to perform miracles with his staff. The prophet protests again that he is not an eloquent man but 'slow of speech

¹ Exod 3, 1-4, 17. Cf Exod 6, 2-13; 6, 28-7, 7.

² Jon 4, 3.

and tongue', and again Yahweh promises, 'Go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak'. Finally the dialogue reaches its climax when Moses, in desperation and at a loss for further pretext, exclaims: 'Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person'. At this the Lord grew angry and dismissed Moses' last protestation with the command that he take his brother Aaron to be his spokesman: 'And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do'.

Moses then obeys his call, and undertakes his mission with a courage and perseverance scarcely foreshadowed in his first reluctance. The execution of his mission appears as another dialogue, a lifelong one, in which the prophet is instructed by Yahweh at every juncture. His former inability to speak vanishes and he becomes eloquent in the words of the Lord. What is most characteristic of the mission of Moses, and what explains his transformation and success, is the unparalleled intimacy with God which he enjoys. 'Being on speaking terms' with God is a mark of all the prophets, but with none of them is Yahweh quite so familiar as with the first prophet: 'If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord'.¹ Elsewhere the biblical writer himself reflects: 'Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend'.² Moses does not actually see the face of God; but he achieves a degree of intimacy that will be recalled when the Son of God, the new Moses, authenticates his sonship with the claim to complete intimacy with the Father.³

It would be possible to trace instructive details of the vocation of many of the prophets on the model of the call of Moses, but we shall confine our remarks here to a few particulars of the experience of three of the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.⁴ Each episode contains a vision in which God communicates with his chosen servant. Isaiah is in the Temple, and he beholds a vision of

¹ Num 12, 6-8.

² Exod 33, 11.

³ Exod 33, 20; Jn 1, 18; 6, 46; etc.

⁴ Cf Isai 6; Jer 1; Ezek 1-3. Two visions follow the call of Jeremiah and these are symbolic appearances of the rod of almond which contains a verbal play indicating Yahweh's watchfulness, and the boiling pot facing away from the north which symbolises the threat of evil to come upon Jerusalem from the north. These visions relate rather to the content of Jeremiah's prophecy than to the experience of his vocation.

the Lord enthroned beneath the seraphim. Ezekiel, in exile in Babylonia, has a vision of the throne-chariot and the four 'living creatures'. Jeremiah does not describe his inaugural vision in any detail, but he implies some sort of vision of the Lord in the reference to the Lord touching his lips to prepare him for his ministry.

When the three prophets have heard the word of Yahweh summoning them to their prophetic mission, each one reacts in his own way. But for all of them, as for Moses, there is a symbolic preparation for the mission of communicating the word of the Lord. If we analyse the prophets' reaction to their call, we find that their initial protestations or fears correspond to the two main aspects of their mission. The objection that they are unworthy of the task laid upon them corresponds to the ministry of preaching, and exemplifying in their own life and conduct, the themes of repentance and personal holiness; and the objection that they are unable to speak relates to the ministry of the word itself. Their objections do not spring from false humility. God chooses in them, as he did in Moses, men without special preparation or experience, to achieve what is essentially his own work. The sanctity they radiate will be the holiness of God, and the words they communicate will be the words of God.

The transformation effected upon Isaiah is perhaps the clearest example of all. Having seen the vision he laments: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'! Then one of the seraphim in the vision touches his mouth with a burning coal and announces: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven'. Symbolically, Isaiah is given the power to speak the words of Yahweh and also the personal sanctity required for this mission; so that when the voice of the Lord asks, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?', Isaiah actually volunteers for the mission: 'Here I am! Send me'. There is no further lament or hesitation once God has acted upon his messenger.

To Jeremiah the voice of the Lord announces:

Before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah protests, 'Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth'. Yahweh replies with the same reassurance that he had given to Moses:

To all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you.

Then Yahweh touches the prophet's mouth and says, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth': the symbolic gesture conferring the ministry. Jeremiah makes no further protest; again the power of God has rendered any further objection meaningless.

In Ezekiel's description of his prophetic call, we find the prophet remaining more or less passive in the face of the experience. But he too at first reacts with fear at the sight of the glory of the Lord; he rises to his feet only when the Spirit has entered into him. We must conclude that his initial fear is overcome by this Spirit – the experience of it is mentioned more than once in the account – and by the exhortation not to be afraid in the mission he is to undertake. Ezekiel does not verbally protest his inability to speak, but this again can be inferred from his fear and from the visionary steps taken to correct it. 'You shall speak my words to them', says the Lord. Then a scroll, covered on both sides with 'words of lamentation and mourning and woe', is shown to the prophet, who is commanded to eat it: 'Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel'. Ezekiel obeys and the scroll is 'sweet as honey' in his mouth. Through this vivid imagery and through the repeated words of Yahweh, what emerges as the overwhelming aspect of Ezekiel's prophetic vocation is that in the ministry of the word the prophet is called upon to communicate only the words of God. Strength and confidence come from the fact that it is Yahweh who will speak through his lips, but at the same time complete domination of one's own personality is demanded. The prophetic experience may be said to involve an heroic sanctity, an emptying of self that looks forward to the *kenosis* of the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh.¹

How did the prophets describe their mission as first expressed to them by Yahweh? In the Jonah story, the prophet is instructed simply to go to Nineveh 'and cry against it', or to go 'and proclaim to it the message that I tell you'. These laconic instructions presuppose that the reader is already familiar with the typical prophetic

¹ Cf Phil 2, 6–11. The emptying of himself that is applied to Jesus by the hymn St Paul quotes is, of course, on another plane, but we may legitimately note the association of total self-offering with the ministry of the word even in the Old Testament.

mission. Moses is not the direct prototype here, for he is distinguished from the later prophets not, as we have seen, by the experience of his vocation, but by the content of his preaching and action. Moses was sent to lead the people forth from bondage in Egypt to the Land of Promise, and in so doing to lead them from the obscurity of their worship of God to a knowledge of Yahweh, of his name, his mercy, his laws, his will to save his people: in short, to establish the religion of the Old Testament. The later prophetic mission is not, of course, unrelated to this, for all the prophets are to be concerned with revivifying the wavering faith of a 'rebellious people'.

Jeremiah provides a link with the prophetic activity of Moses. After the introductory account of his call, the second chapter of his collected prophecies begins with a poignant recollection of the events of Moses' day:

Thus says the Lord,
I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride . . .
Israel was holy to the Lord,
the first fruits of his harvest . . .
What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?¹

After referring specifically to the exodus, the passage goes on to reproach the house of Israel for their infidelities to the will of God and to warn them of the impending judgement and punishment.

And this is the first and dominating characteristic of the prophetic mission: the prophet's voice is the voice of judgement, of condemnation, of crushing punishment, foretold and interpreted, that will lay waste the unfaithful children of God's love. The prophet's voice is the voice of Israel's conscience, and a guilty conscience it is.² But it would be a serious misrepresentation to think that the prophet has nothing but doom to prophesy. If there seems to be a sort of fatalism in his attitude towards the imminent destruction – Jeremiah actually counsels surrender to the threat of invasion and servitude – it is not the relentless and blind fatalism of the pagan, but submission to the will of God, which the prophet knows must work

¹ Jer 2, 2-4.

² Cf B. Vawter, C.M., *The Conscience of Israel. Pre-Exilic Prophets and Prophecy* (London 1961), pp 16-17.

itself out to punish as well as to save. It is therefore an essential part of the prophet's mission to preach repentance and conversion of heart to Yahweh; for out of the cataclysm that threatens Israel or Judah, Yahweh wills to save for himself a faithful core of israelites to be the seed of a new generation, heirs of the promise. In the inaugural experience of Jeremiah, both the negative and positive aspects of his mission find expression. Yahweh instructs the prophet:

Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.

In the account of Isaiah's vocation to prophethood, there is also a concise summary of his prophetic message, in which his role of bringing upon the nation a consciousness of its impending doom is even more vividly expressed. After volunteering to be 'sent', Isaiah is told:

Go, and say to this people:
Hear and hear, but do not understand;
see and see, but do not perceive.
Make the heart of this people fat,
and their ears heavy,
and shut their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.

Infidelity has already gone too far; the hardening of the sinful people's hearts is the direct result of their sin; and though it may seem that the very warnings and exhortations of the prophet serve only to stimulate resistance, the prophet must not be discouraged on this account. This process of resistance to the love of God will attain its climax in the destruction of the people and the country, when 'the land is utterly desolate'.

But Isaiah's prophetic mission is far from being merely negative.¹ He is the most positive of the pre-exilic prophets. He prophesies not only doom, but salvation. Much of his message concerns repentance,

¹ Cf J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1962), pp 186-189.

though it may often fall on deaf ears. And the motive for repentance and rekindled faith in Yahweh is the doctrine concerning the remnant that is to be saved, the future messianic king and his faithful followers, in whom God will establish a new era of humanity. In the words just quoted, this doctrine is stated in the metaphor of the stump that remains standing when the tree is felled and which will be the source of a new growth:

Like the terebinth and like the oak,
whose stump alone remains from the felling,
its stump shall be a holy seed.¹

— a metaphor which recurs in a better known passage cited by St Paul to his Romans:

There shall come forth a shoot
from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch will grow out of its roots.²

Throughout the entire prophesy, the doctrine of the saved remnant acts as a foil to the constant warning of destruction.

Ezekiel, too, shows a similar interplay of judgement and hope, of condemnation and comfort.

It is only to be expected that with the final destruction of Judah, the tone of prophecy should change, with greater stress on the message of hope. Despite the modern distortion of the word prophecy, the prophets were primarily concerned with interpreting the contemporary situation to their own generation. Post-exilic prophecy also stresses the moral responsibility of the prophet towards his people. 'Son of man', says Yahweh to Ezekiel, 'I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me'. If wickedness goes unadmonished, the prophet will share in the punishment of the wicked. Only if the prophet has done his duty, though the sinner persist in his sin, nevertheless will the prophet himself escape. The free will of the people is respected, but the prophet bears a peculiar responsibility in the ethical and religious life of the nation.

In general, then, the common denominator of the prophetic mission is a ministry of the word of God carrying the twofold theme of warning and reassurance, of repentance and hope, of judgment

¹ Cf Vawter, *op. cit.*, 204.

² Isai 11, 1; cf 11, 10 and Rom 15, 12.

(in the case of condemnation) and salvation.¹ These two themes are interwoven throughout the narrative of the great prophets. They are overwhelmed by the alarming degree to which the chosen people, the people whose very being was constituted by the loving election of God and the covenant made with their fathers, had departed from the purity this privileged state demanded. Sin and syncretism were the besetting evils: the denial of that love which should be expressed through faithful observance of the law, and the adoption of pagan practices. As punishment Yahweh had willed the destruction of the people of Israel. The prophets preached repentance, but their voice was not heeded. At the same time, they were acquainted not only with the wrath of God, but with his enduring loving kindness, his limitless mercy. And out of this mercy he bade them nourish hope in the remnant of Israel which was to be the seed of the glorious messianic age to come.

Little has been said here of the messianic prophecies or the eschatology of the prophets, though this is an essential element in their mission. It is difficult for us to know how far the prophets themselves were aware of the messianic dimensions of these many sayings which the Church, from New Testament times, has referred to Jesus Christ.² However, the principal role of the Old Testament prophets was not to predict the coming of Christ and the Church, even though Christ and the Church fulfilled and even surpassed the picture of the future which they drew. Rather, their primary function was to prepare for the coming of Christ. Their 'being sent' by God was intended as preparation for the supreme act of sending, the mission of the Son of God into the world.

If we examine this 'non-predictive' preparation in the light of the content of the prophetic mission, we find that it was the historical act of keeping Israel faithful to the religion of her election. It was the relentless effort to make the nation see the impending judgement and the reasons for it, to feel the repentance that was an indispensable condition for the salvation to come, and finally to hope in that coming. And what was the preaching of Jesus himself but an interweaving of the themes of judgment and salvation: a judgment that he would suffer for all men, and a salvation that his suffering and ultimate triumph would bring about? Secondly, with regard to the prophetic experience itself, preparing the way of the Saviour was a

¹ Cf Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp 311-322.

² Cf Vawter, *op. cit.*, pp 5-6, 54-57, 289-295, etc.

manifestation of what it meant to be sent by God. The prophetic ministry was a mediation of the word of God to men, in the face of almost overwhelming resistance and opposition; in themselves and in the people Israel the prophets foreshadowed the coming of the Word Incarnate, who was to mediate in ways then undreamt of.

All these themes of the prophetic mission are epitomised in sublime fashion by an unknown exilic prophet today commonly referred to as the Second Isaiah. We know little about him; even his name is hidden behind that of the great prophet with whose work his oracles were later to be linked. The opening passage of his work, which may be taken as describing part of the experience of his vocation, contains the lines used by the evangelists to describe the mission of John the Baptist:

A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.¹

It is in particular in the passage called the Servant Songs that our theme of preparation is best expressed. Whether the songs refer to the experience of the people Israel as a whole, or to some real individual, someone known to the prophet or indeed the prophet himself, or to an ideal individual representing the people or, both to an individual and a corporate personality: whoever the Servant is, it is certain that the songs have always been read by the Church as pointing to Christ.² In part at least they reflect the experience of the prophet in his intimate relationship with the role of Israel in foreshadowing the coming of the Saviour. To understand how the songs summarise the prophetic preparation, one needs to read them prayerfully and in their entirety. One short quotation may suffice to conclude these reflections on the prophetic mission; it is the call of Yahweh instructing the Servant on the terms of his mission:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.³

¹ Isai 40, 3; cf Mt 3, 3 and parallels.

² Cf F. L. Moriarty, S.J., 'The Suffering Servant', *THE WAY* (April 1962) pp 121-134.

³ Isai 42, 6-7. Cf J. L. McKenzie, S.J., *The Two-Edged Sword* (London 1956) pp 239 ff.