PREACHER AND PROPHET

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How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of one who brings good tidings (Isai 52, 7)

THE EARLIEST form of evangelization is found in the prophetic ministry of communicating God's word to the people of Israel. Simply put, to evangelize is to share good news. The prophets see themselves essentially as bearers of a word not their own, even though this word is cast in the speech-forms proper to their own time and adapted to contemporary culture. If it is true that Israel could scarcely have survived apart from the prophetic vision, then it is to the prophets, chosen mediators between God and a community, that we must look as the earliest and most authentic representatives of an evangelization which kept alive the hopes of Israel.

To take only the basic issue of etymology, the words 'to evangelize' come directly from the Hebrew root *bśr*, a word attested in two strata of the Old Testament tradition, prophets and psalms, more clearly in the former.[1] In a theological sense, and always with the meaning of God's good tidings, the root *bśr* occurs only in the intensive form of the verb 'to announce good news', and as a substantival participle, 'herald of good news'. This word is brought to a high pitch of theological intensity in Third Isaiah (61, 1), where the herald, in the power of the Spirit, is anointed for the task of announcing the good news of liberation to the dispirited exiles longing for the return to Zion. Once the hebrew *mebaśśer*, 'herald of good tidings', had been turned into the greek *evangelizomenos*, the way was open for the New Testament appropriation of this term to describe the

[1] Cf Nah 2, 1; Isai 40, 9; 41, 27; 60, 6; 61, 1; Pss 40, 10; 68, 12; 96, 2. The root is also found in Akkadian *bussuru*, 'to bring a message', and in Ugaritic *bśr*, 'to bring glad tidings', reminding us again how the Hebrews took a word from the common lexical stock of the ancient Near East, and gave it a specific and profound theological meaning fully consonant with Yahwistic belief.

evangelist as one who brings the good news of what the Lord has done for his people. The semantic development of this term, which is at home in the semitic vocabulary of the ancient Near East, can be seen within the Old Testament itself and, even more strikingly, in the New Testament.

Looking at preaching or evangelizing as the basic task of the prophetic office, it is useful to note the continuity which cuts across the centuries and joins an Amos or Micah to the prophet of our time. The modern counterpart of Israel's heralds, formed by long and prayerful contact with biblical revelation, perceives God's action in history as a paradigm for understanding what God is doing right now. Prophetic responsibility means interpreting the will of God in a way which is intelligible to people today, eliciting from them an appropriate and faithful response to the Lord of history. This continuity, however, may not be purchased at the expense of obscuring the important differences between Old Testament prophets and modern 'prophets', who draw their inspiration from ancient forebears, whose experience of God and subsequent prophetic activity must still be seen as something unique and unrepeatable in the history of religion. Analogy, not identity, is the key to understanding the enormously broad spectrum of prophetic vocation. Reflection upon the nature and function of prophecy in Israel, the standard by which all later prophetic activity is judged, may illuminate our present responsibility.

Prophet and tradition

Prophecy in Israel appears at least as early as the time of Samuel, and the hebrew tradition even remembered Moses as exercising the prophetic office.[2] Nevertheless, to keep within some limits, our concern will be with the classical prophets, who emerge in the eighth century B.C. and disappear at some undetermined time in the post-exilic period. These are the canonical prophets, whose writings are permanently preserved as sacred literature by the jewish community, following a long and somewhat obscure transmission of their oracles. Modern study of the prophets has yielded certain results which put their evangelizing task into better perspective. For example, they no longer appear as isolated figures on the landscape of the israelite religious experience. Modern scholarship insists on the continuity between the prophets and an antecedent tradition

[2] Cf Deut 18, 15; 34, 10.

which formed them; and this in turn was shaped by their message. The prophets do not impugn the past; they fulfil it.

It is not easy to summarize the tradition which undergirded prophetic activity; but certain elements stand out quite clearly. While the emphasis in the earlier strata of hebrew tradition is upon the community and its collective interests, the Old Testament has constructed a solid basis for that concept of individual human dignity which is characteristic of the judeo-christian tradition, and which still exercises a powerful influence in a world where freedom and dignity are often embattled. The distinctive Old Testament doctrine of creation, in paradoxical fashion, leaves humanity in no doubt of its absolute dependence upon the Creator. Individual life is placed under unconditional obligation to God, as W. Eichrodt has powerfully expressed it:

> Divine authority is concentrated in a single personal will, which takes complete hold of the man addressed by it, and tolerates no other claim. Here the obligation imposed by the law is unconditional. . . . In the strict 'Thou shalt' of the Decalogue and of other brief basic laws, it is not some human lawgiver but the divine Lawgiver himself who speaks and makes his will the absolute norm.[3]

But this absolute dependence of the creature, whose classic expression breaks forth in the divine speeches at the end of the Book of Job, is balanced by another aspect which confers upon humanity a new and unique dignity. We are made in the image of God. Whatever may be the exact meaning of that phrase, the text is telling us that the human person, and no other creature, reflects in a real way the glory of the wholly Other. Blasphemous though it may sound, the text says that if you want some idea of what this mysterious God is like, take a look at a human being! But there is more. God honours this person by an invitation to encounter. God addresses us, speaks to us in an I-Thou dialogue, and awaits our response to the challenging word. No passage in the Old Testament has caught more trenchantly this astounding paradox of human dependence and dignity than the eighth psalm.[4]

This is the person whose dignity was defended by the prophet Amos, affirmed insistently in the Gospels, re-affirmed in the documents of Vatican II, and most recently proclaimed with new vigour by Pope John Paul II in his address at Puebla just a year ago. A month later the Holy Father, summarizing the meeting at Puebla, called this

[3] *Man in the Old Testament* (London, 1951), p 15.

[4] Ps 8, 3-6.

dedication to liberation a 'participation in Christ's prophetic service', as he condemned all exploitation of the human person by any institution, system or the State, as well as any violence inflicted against the human body, spirit and cherished convictions.

But the tradition upon which prophetic proclamation rested also had a strong communal element, made concrete in the belief that Israel, through a series of covenants, existed in a special relationship to Yahweh. Through this very community relationship, the individual acquired a new and inviolable dignity. Characteristic of israelite faith from the earliest times is a steady confidence that Israel's future has been secured by the promises of Yahweh, made either to individuals or to the nation as a whole. The historical traditions embedded in the pentateuch and the following six books (Former Prophets) of the Old Testament recall again and again the historical interventions of Yahweh in favour of his people. It is a story of promises made and kept. But underneath this record of saving events, one finds two different though related understandings of Israel's relationship to Yahweh.

To begin with, there is the earliest expression of divine choice and preference in the covenant with Abraham. Analysis of this choice yields a picture of divine commitment without reservations or conditions. There are no laws to obey nor obligations to fulfil; only faith, openness to God's promises, is required. We have no reason to suspect that confidence in the promises made to Abraham died an early death; in fact, there is good reason, despite obscurity in details, for claiming that, in the newly constituted kingdom of Judah, the covenant with David adopted the essential elements of the patriarchal covenant, attaching to David and his dynasty the unconditional commitment of God to Israel. As one writer has succinctly expressed it, the covenant with Abraham was the 'prophecy', and that with David the 'fulfilment'.[5] This covenant, eventually developing into a royal theology, formed, as we shall see, the substratum of Isaiah's prophetic ministry in Jerusalem.

But the covenant mediated to Israel by Moses at Sinai is something quite different from a covenant which is essentially a promissory oath, taken by Yahweh to guarantee the future of his people. The Sinai covenant was indeed an act of gracious condescension, based on the liberation of an oppressed people from their egyptian

[5] Mendenhall, G. E.: *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, 1955), p 46.

bondage. But it also included explicit stipulations, commandments to observe, as a condition for Yahweh's continuance of this covenant relationship. Fidelity to the stipulations meant the assurance of divine blessing, but disobedience carried the threat of a broken relationship and the danger of permanent dissolution of the covenant bond. Historical events provided their own grim sanction with the destruction of North Israel in 721 B.C., to be followed by the overthrow of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C. Thus this covenant-pattern created and sustained a new moral relationship, rooted in the double experience of gracious benefits and the claim made on Israel to respond to this surprising and saving initiative.

There is an obvious tension between these two forms of Israel's relationship to Yahweh, the Abrahamic/Davidic and Mosaic. Was it possible for Yahweh to terminate a relationship because of (Sinai) covenant-violations, and yet guarantee the perpetuity of a relationship founded upon another (Abrahamic/Davidic) covenant? This is the dilemma of two apparently conflicting relationships, both of which provide a theological background for the preaching of the prophets. Then, too, their message was spoken to a divided monarchy north and south. Judah built its hope upon the sure promises made to David, almost, but not entirely, pushing the threats inherent in the Sinai covenant out of national consciousness. In the north, where the royal davidic theology never obtained a solid foothold, the Sinai covenant was predominant, as is clear from the oracles of Amos and Hosea, both of whom castigated the north for violations of covenant obligations. It was left to the later classical prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah and others, face to face with national catastrophe, to try and resolve the dilemma of conflicting relationships. They did this by holding out the vision of a new and gracious intervention of Yahweh in the future, an act of forgiveness which would restate Yahweh's irreversible commitment to his people. How this was to be achieved leads to the radically different faith assessments of this new covenant relationship by Jews and Christians.

The originality of prophetic liberation

From what has been said, it should be clear that the prophetic proclamation consists in a creative appropriation of a sacred tradition, the evocation of a past in order to release a liberating word in the present. The preaching of the prophets is an act of liberation, whether the word is one of judgment or promise. A brief examination of certain classical prophets will show how a person is

commissioned by Yahweh to bring into jarring but salutary confrontation past heritage and contemporary situation. In the eighth century B.C., a shepherd of Judah, Amos, was called to proclaim a judgmental but liberating word to North Israel, an affluent society blind to the forces of destruction which would overwhelm it within a generation. One cannot help but notice the prophetic mistrust of power, the biblical bias against leaders capable of imposing warped and suffocating institutions upon their own social world. The scathing denunciations of those who oppressed and cheated the poor have a peculiarly modern ring, and offer an excellent paradigm of what prophetic activity was all about. Those who are struggling against an institutional violence which sometimes subtly, sometimes brutally, attacks human dignity and life relate very easily to this uncomplicated man who, without thought of personal consequences, described the powerful of Israel thus:

> They hate one who reproves in the gate,
> and abhor one who speaks the truth.
> Therefore because you trample on the poor . . .
> though you built houses of hewn stone
> you will not live in them. . . .[6]

It is that shackling of the spirit on the rack of a selfish and affluent culture that has blinded this people to their denial of a real love and concern for the weak and defenceless. Amos condemned the absence of love in a nation which rejoiced in its abundance.

Under no circumstances, however, should Amos be seen as one more social reformer. It was not from any sense of personal outrage or merely humanitarian reasons that he condemned the sins of North Israel. His message grows out of his theology; though he does not use the word 'covenant', he is obviously excoriating violations of covenant law. He can even set these crimes against the backdrop of Yahweh's gracious acts of deliverance and granting of the land.[7] The word of judgment pronounced by Amos was a liberating word in so far as it was a revelation of the real nature of sin as an offence against God. The doom which hung over North Israel was not something due merely to the interplay of human forces, but a divine judgment on a nation which had turned its back on her covenant Lord. Is this liberating word utterly without hope? The oracles of hope at the end of the last chapter are often denied to Amos;[8] but

[6] Amos 5, 10-12. [7] 2, 9-12; 3, 1-2. [8] 9, 11-12. 13-15.

it can be argued that they are consistent with the traditions out of which he spoke and, above all, consistent with One who could not ultimately withhold his mercy from a people who had merited the judgment which lay just ahead.

With Hosea, the only classical prophet who came from North Israel, there is the same unflinching attack on covenant infidelity which we saw in Amos. This time the emphasis is upon religious apostasy, the desertion of Yahweh for Baal, though crimes of violence against the weak are not entirely overlooked. His prophetic preaching, equally if not more so than Amos, grows out of the traditions of the saving history. As Gerhard von Rad remarked: 'It might almost be said that he [Hosea] only feels safe when he can base his arguments in history'.[9] The prophet's personal experience of tragedy in his marriage was the prism through which he saw the adultery of Israel, the bride of Yahweh. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel is compared to a marriage relationship: Israel had left her husband for other lovers, and so Yahweh was about to divorce her, drive her from his presence and bring to an end Israel's existence as a nation. Again the emphasis is upon judgment and inevitable destruction. It is proclaimed with a depth of personal emotion which gives the message a warmth and intensity of expression unmatched elsewhere.[10] Israel was so enmeshed in an evil which she herself unleashed that there was no way out for her: 'their deeds do not allow them to return to their God. For the spirit of harlotry is within them'.[11] Israel found herself in a kind of determination to evil; but this was no working out of any impersonal law binding her to this fate. It was Yahweh, the abandoned lover, who was rising up against her; and he would repudiate his own. Can there be a ray of hope, any liberating element in this frightening picture of a disintegrating society as drawn by Hosea? Could Israel possibly survive this judgment which sometimes looks like a return to the wilderness wanderings? If there is some doubt about a promise for the future in Amos, it is very clear that Hosea held out hope to faithless Israel; not because of any works she would perform, even the unlikely one of genuine repentance. This hope, the good news of the evangelist, is found in Yahweh's mercy which wins out over his anger. Not only do we have here one of the high-points of Old Testament theology; it is a daring and unprecedented invitation to witness this struggle going on in the heart of Yahweh.

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[9] *The Message of the Prophets* (London, 1968), p 111. [10] Cf Hos 4, 12-13. [11] Cf Hos 5, 4.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel? . . .
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not give vent to my anger, nor destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst.[12]

The prophetic word of Hosea promises chastisement, swift and devastating; but it is at the same time an offer of interior conversion — liberation from that evil of idolatry which has broken the bond between Yahweh and his bride. Sharing in the divine pathos, as Abraham Heschel has reminded us, Hosea has revealed Yahweh's fundamental disposition of love which overcomes wrath. Healing and reconciliation, not hurt and destruction, are its decisive components.

The last eighth-century prophet to be considered is Isaiah, whose career covered approximately the last forty years of the eighth century. While the traditions of exodus and Sinai covenant were not unknown to him, this Extraordinary spiritual figure was influenced most of all by the promises made to David, the traditions clustered around Yahweh's choice of Mount Zion as his dwelling-place. Consider the following passage which, for all its historical indefiniteness, proclaims a boundless faith in Yahweh's triumph over the foes which surge against his citadel on Zion.

Ah! the roaring of many peoples . . .
they surge like the surging of mighty waters!
But he will rebuke them,
and they will flee far away.
In the evening, behold, terror!
Before morning, they are no more!
Such is the portion of those who despoil us,
the lot of those who plunder us.[13]

Before installing Isaiah as the patron of political theology, let us make sure that we recognize the politics of faith! Isaiah's liberating word, reinforced by the overwhelming religious experience of chapter 6, is centred on absolute trust in Yahweh's power and will to save. In no sense is he indifferent to the cries of the oppressed; this is clear to anyone who reads his prophecies. But the substance of his good news concerns the promises made by Yahweh to David, and the need to replace human schemes with complete confidence in Yahweh's saving plan. Whether it is the crisis provoked by the

[12] Hos 11, 8-9. [13] Isai 17, 12-14.

hostile coalition of North Israel and Damascus (ch 7), or his opposition to revolt against Assyria (ch 20), or his reassurance to the Davidic king Hezekiah that Sennacherib would not take Jerusalem (ch 37), the appeal is always to trust in Yahweh's promises, the substitution of faith for reliance on self.

Isaiah preached a liberating word by summoning the people to break out of a narrow and hopeless reliance on their own resources, and to leave room for the sovereign action of Yahweh. It was a creative appropriation of the old traditions, in that Isaiah did not stop with what Yahweh had done in the past. Everyone knew that Yahweh had ordered Samuel to anoint David, and had chosen to dwell on Zion. Isaiah's vision embraced a future, purified Zion as well as a future anointed One, the new David, who would fully realize the royal ideal and bring that justice and peace which were signs that God's reign had begun on earth.

Re-fashioning the shattered jar

As the seventh century B.C. drew to a close, the patterns of power in the ancient Near East had shifted drastically. After a century of brutal hegemony, the assyrian empire was about to collapse, only to be replaced by the rising power of Babylon which, with the assistance of the Medes, utterly destroyed Nineveh and drove the remnant of the assyrian army across the Euphrates. The prophecy of Nahum is a cry of triumph at the awesome destruction of Nineveh, and mirrors the joy which ran throughout the ancient world when the news came, 'Nineveh is laid waste!' For the moment, Yahweh's authority over all the nations was vindicated; but for Judah it soon turned out to be only a change of masters. Babylon, under the dynamic leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, swiftly took control, and the way south to Syria and Palestine lay open to her armies. It was only a matter of time before Judah and her capital, Jerusalem, would fall to the foe from the north. It is in the context of these events and their aftermath that Jeremiah exercised his prophetic ministry. Born in the village of Anathoth, which lay just a few miles north-east of Jerusalem, he belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, in which the traditions of Exodus and Sinai predominated over the traditions attached to David and the royal theology. He would meet the matter in a head-on confrontation later, especially in the famous temple sermon (7, 1-15), which attacked the false security placed by a self-deluded people in the temple of Jerusalem. It was a futile attempt to liberate his people from their dangerous illusions.

Jeremiah was a complex and extremely sensitive man. Perhaps the best key to his personality is the tension which grew out of his vocation to pronounce judgment upon a people he deeply loved.[14] We are fortunate, moreover, in having a series of passages, unparalleled in any other prophetic collection, which reveal the inner torment of Jeremiah.[15] They are the revelations of a divided heart, torn between fidelity to his prophetic mission and the sorrow of one who anguished over the coming judgment he must proclaim. What this cost Jeremiah in terms of interior suffering can be seen from the climactic soliloquy which best captures the turmoil of the prophet's inner life.

> Yahweh, you have deceived me, and I was deceived.
> You have overcome me, Yes, you have prevailed!
> I have become a laughing-stock all day long,
> everyone mocks me.[16]

Faithful to the traditions of the Sinai covenant which were a part of his heritage and, above all, to the God who had destined him from the womb as the bearer of his effective word, Jeremiah became, in word and symbolic act, an agent of his country's ruin. But the potter destroys in order to create a more perfect vessel; and Jeremiah could not forget that his mission set him over nations and kingdoms, not simply to destroy and overthrow, but to build and plant (1, 10). Like the prophets before him, Jeremiah could not accept the principle that Yahweh's final word to his people was one of judgment and condemnation. Beyond the destruction which was visible all around, Jeremiah knew that God's commitment to the nation persisted. The question was, how would this privileged relationship be restored and perpetuated? Each of the prophets, depending upon temperament and style, had a very personal way of expressing the conviction of Yahweh's will to save. For Jeremiah, so conscious that the old covenant had been broken beyond repair, it was the vision of a new covenant in an indefinite future between Yahweh and a people interiorly renewed by the spirit.

> 'Look, days are coming', says Yahweh, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by

[14] Cf Jer 4, 19.

[15] These are the 'Confessions' of Jeremiah and are found in Jer 11, 18-12, 6; 15, 10-21; 18, 18-23; 20, 7-18.

[16] Jer 20, 7-9.

> the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, for they broke my covenant, though I was their husband', says Yahweh. 'But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days', says Yahweh. 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts'.[17]

The good news is that the covenant relationship is broken but eventually brought to a new and more perfect level of perfection. This picture of inwardly transformed people foreshadows that new covenant of grace, in which christian liberty has given a new character and lustre to our obedience.

In this all too sketchy survey, the last prophet to be considered will be the unknown author of Isaiah 40-55, generally known as Second Isaiah. His preaching is especially pertinent from the standpoint of his own historical situation, as well as his adaptation of both creation and covenant traditions to contemporary events. If he looked to the past, it was to foster hope in the present. After almost fifty years of captivity in Babylon, Yahweh, our prophet proclaims, was about to do a new thing. The traumatic experience of the exile had placed in jeopardy the whole life and faith of the elect people. Second Isaiah's constant appeal to the saving acts of the past, beginning with creation and continuing on through the election and protection of Israel, is meant to open the eyes of faith to the new and unexpected things about to happen in her history. A redemptive break-through was at hand.[18]

In this recasting of the ancient traditions there has been a great shift from the accusatory oracles of pre-exilic prophecy; the message is now one of Yahweh's forgiveness bursting forth with a new and unexpected power. Second Isaiah sees his prophetic ministry as one of voicing a new blessing at this special hour of Israel's history. Von Rad has best caught the throbbing sense of newness at this great historical and spiritual crossroads: 'As the prophets viewed history, the exile was an end; as a threat which had received fulfilment, it was the end of a road leading from prophecy to fulfilment. Now, however, in Second Isaiah's eyes, the "new" event is on the point of beginning, for its dawning rays are already visible. "The first has passed away", and only remains valid as a type of the new. Never before had a prophet so sharply marked off the inauguration of the *eschaton*, nor so strictly dissociated it from all Yahweh's previous actions in history'.[19]

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[17] Jer 32, 31-34. [18] Cf Isai 43, 19-21. [19] *Op. cit.*, p 215.

The violence which redeems

Scholarship has isolated the four Servant Songs without, however, being able to decide either their authorship or their exact interpretation.[20] In their diction and general thrust, they have much in common with the other chapters assigned to Second Isaiah; but they have their own enigmas and do not fit easily in their present contexts. The fourth song of the Suffering Servant is particularly appropriate for the current debate over the place of violence in the prophetic ministry, when that ministry must come to grips with the flagrant denial of human rights by a society in which violence has been institutionalized. While it is extremely risky to seek quick and satisfying answers to our present problems in either the Old Testament or the New Testament, this much can be said. The bible gives no countenance to violence; and there is not, to my knowledge, a single text in which the technical word for violence (*hamas*) is approved or recommended as a means to redress injustice and oppression. In the Old Testament, violence, either as a verb or substantive, is seen as something reprehensible, and there is simply no encouragement to meet violence with violence.

In the image of the Suffering Servant a new and original method of meeting violence is proposed. The servant is described as one who 'had done no violence' (53, 9), even though his affliction is described in an unparalleled piling up of verbs which denote violence (53, 3-10). But this is no senseless violence; by his suffering the Servant has brought healing and salvation to many. For once, violence is depicted as creative, redemptive. Christians affirm that, at its deepest level, this creativity of violence rested upon the mystery of love, whose fullest expression would be found in the obedience of a Son.

[20] The Songs may be found in the following passages: Isai 42, 1-7; 49, 1-6; 50, 4-9; 52, 13 - 53, 12.