PROPHECY NOW: THE TUG INTO THE FUTURE

By BRENDAN BYRNE

PROPHETS ARE ESSENTIALLY disturbers of rest. Their clamour, their provocation invade the comfortable, the complacent, what might be seen as the spiritually privileged and secure. If their witness concerned only the future—as is perhaps the notion of prophecy in everyday thought—then we could live more comfortably with them, putting off our response till a more acceptable time. Today the prophetic issues are pressing and decidedly of *this* world: disarmament, peace, poverty, equal rights for women and oppressed minorities. They beat insistently on the door of every spirituality. How are we to accommodate, to evaluate this disturbing presence? What legitimacy does it have within the broader tradition?

In what follows I should like to reflect upon the worldly aspect of Christian prophecy from a New Testament perspective, specifically from that of St Paul as given in the Letter to the Romans. Paul does not treat the Christian 'gift' or *charisma* of 'prophecy' explicitly in Romans, as he does, for example in 1 Corinthians 12–14. But the mature account of his gospel contained in his greatest letter sheds much light upon the place of the prophetic in Christian life. It does so in terms of two key motifs presupposed throughout the letter, though rarely rising explicitly to its surface. The first presupposition on Paul's part is that what God was doing in Christ was bringing to fulfilment his original design for human beings and the world outlined in the creation accounts of Genesis 1–3. The second has to do with Paul's vision of that fulfilment as taking place within the time-scheme of the 'two ages' and as involving a transfer from the old age to the new, a transfer only partially complete in present Christian life. I shall explore these two motifs, focussing chiefly on that most approachable section of Romans, that is, chapter 8. I hope to show the key role of prophecy to be that of making the transfer a continuing rather than a frozen

process in Christian community life. The shock of the prophet's 'worldly' witness jerks and tugs us away from the old to an ever-clearer vision of the new humanity to which God is summoning us in Christ.

Genesis revisited: Paul's view of God's faithfulness in Romans

Paul's theological enterprise in Romans has its origins in his long-term consideration of the twin problems of the inclusion of the Gentiles and the (apparent) self-exclusion of Israel from God's offer of salvation in Christ. The distinctive vision of the letter emerges from his consideration of this problem against the background of the Old Testament concept of the 'saving fidelity' (or 'righteousness', Greek: *dikaiosune*) of God. Pursuing an idea taken largely from Second Isaiah (Isai 40–66), sharpened in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, Paul presents God as the one who always acts with integrity and faithfulness towards his creatures. God remains faithful to the relationship he has established even when human beings act unfaithfully towards him. Graciously and unilaterally he acts to restore the relationship and recreate the humanity lost when human beings fall out of vital relationship with the creator. Paul sees God's sending of his Son in the person of Jesus Christ, above all his redemptive death, as the culminating instance of this creative fidelity of God (Rom 3,21–26).[1]

Putting things in these terms suggests that there is running in Romans a christology that is very much 'from above': Christ as Son comes from the side of God, embodying God's faithful intervention in his created world. This is correct. But it is not the whole story. Romans also features a christology 'from below', where Christ embodies the perfect human response to God. In him the two fidelities, divine and human, intersect.[2]

It is with respect to this human response of Christ that the Genesis background to Romans is all-important, since Paul sees Christ as re-playing (successfully) the role sketched out for Adam in the opening chapters of the bible. Central to the argument is the foundational account of the relationship between God and human beings given in Genesis 1–3. Of particular significance is Genesis 1,26–27 which describes the creation of human beings in God's image and likeness and, in virtue of this status, assigns to them creative responsibility for the remaining non-human created world.[3] While influenced by certain elaborations of these motifs in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, Paul basically does not depart

from the vision of human relationship with God and the created world sketched in these opening passages of the bible. He uses Adam to tell the story of human failure and falling from relationship with God, with all its destructive effects. He tells 'in Christ' as 'Last Adam' the story of perfect human response to God's gracious offer of relationship.[4]

Within this perspective Christ does not invade the human realm like a visitor from outer space bringing 'salvation' as some kind of overlay upon ordinary human life. Rather, for Paul it is Christ who makes the possibilities for human life sketched in Genesis 1-2 a reality. In contrast to Adam, Christ lives out in perfect fidelity the appropriate relationship of human beings to God. He remains obedient to God even at the cost of a death inflicted by a world alienated from its Creator (Phil 2,6-8). God vindicates this obedience by raising him and inaugurating the new age in his Resurrection. As 'Last Adam' the risen Lord becomes the 'patriarch' of a new humanity, a humanity in which the vision of Genesis 1-2 can become a reality through work of the Spirit unleashed by the Resurrection (1 Cor 15,45). There is a sense, then, in which Romans is Genesis 1-3 rewritten or, to be more precise, Genesis coming true for the first time.

If the recapturing of this original vision of Genesis 1-2 is basic to Paul's thought in Romans, then the gospel there deployed envisages human beings not only in relation to their creator but in their God-given responsibility for the rest of creation as well. This emerges explicitly in Romans 8,18-22, as I shall argue. But already it may well be useful to underline this motif, important as it is for the 'worldly' concern of Christian gifts, including prophecy. A legacy of the Reformation controversy has been the idea that 'justification' has to do simply with relations between God and the individual human soul. The perspective outlined above suggests that it also envisages human beings in the context of the wider world for which, according to Genesis 1,26-27, they are responsible.[5]

An ethic of 'responsibility'

Let us pursue for a moment this idea of 'responsibility'. As is well known, Paul sets up a contrast in Romans between the pursuit of righteousness through 'works of the law' and the righteousness which comes as God's gift appropriated through faith. The former imposes upon human beings a relentless quest for moral perfection which is doomed to frustration because it is powerless to address

the basic selfishness latent in human nature. In it human beings 'go it alone' over against the creator in a way that perverts the right relationship, which is based on grace. In Romans 7 Paul vividly depicts in terms of 'Adam' the fatal tension and moral impossibility thereby created.[6]

Over against this individualistic way of 'law' Paul proposes the new ethical pattern appropriate for a milieu of grace. It is appropriately dubbed an 'ethic of responsibility', since, as I would argue, it catches up the responsibility assigned to human beings in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-3. In Romans 6 and 8 Paul presents the new moral life as one which proceeds entirely from the existence 'in Christ' inaugurated by faith and baptism. It is not a question of conformity to external norms but rather a matter of allowing the obedience of the New Adam to well up within them. Thus the new moral life is in no sense their own achievement over against God. It is something 'fulfilled' in them by the gift of the Spirit, unleashed through God's action in the Christ-event (Rom 8,1-4).[7]

For Paul each individual possesses the gift of the Spirit in the concrete form of their own distinctive gift or *charisma*. It is through their particular gift that each one has a share in the lordship over the universe which Christ enjoys as New Adam. One's gift or charism is not simply a personal spiritual endowment. Each gift, including that of prophecy (ranked second by Paul in the list of 1 Cor 12,28), carries with it a task, a responsibility and a capacity. Through the various gifts of believers the Risen Lord exercises his overall responsibility for creation to the glory of God (Phil 2,9-11).[8]

What this amounts to for Paul is nothing less than the fact that Christian obedience, exercised through each one's gift, is built into God's own saving fidelity ('righteousness') as creator, his responsibility for creation. In Christ believers '*become* the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5,21). As Christ represents personally the embodiment of God's saving fidelity to the world, so believers, in so far as they allow his obedience to well up within them (Phil 2,6-11), become part of the creator's ongoing responsibility for creation. In this way Paul sees the 'charge' given to human beings according to Genesis 1,26-27 coming to effective fulfilment for the first time in Christ as each one exercises his or her spiritual gift to the glory of God. It is within this overall pattern that the particular gift of prophecy finds its place.

The two ages: living in the 'overlap'

The second aspect of Paul's thought in Romans which is crucial to understanding the place of prophecy concerns the doctrine of the 'two ages'. Paul sees God's intervention in Christ as occurring entirely within the framework of this Jewish apocalyptic schema—though his view of what God had done in Christ required its essential modification. The standard Jewish eschatology of the time understood that the present evil, in which the righteous suffer persecution, would be ended by the kind of dramatic intervention of God sketched in the Jewish apocalypses, preparatory to his inauguration of the new age, the time of God's 'rule' or 'kingship'. For Paul, however, the turn of the ages had already come with the Christ-event. Adherence through faith to what God has done in Christ means that believers are 'dead' as far as the old age and its limitations are concerned. In the Spirit believers are already living the life of the new age. Genesis 1-2 is becoming true for them.[9]

But even for believers the new age has not totally taken over. *Bodily* they are still anchored in the old, passing world and suffer in their bodies its buffets, its trials and temptations, even its destiny to physical death. Christians will not be totally conformed to the new age until their bodies share the bodily resurrection of Christ.[10]

Thus Paul's eschatology is more complex than the Jewish patterns from which it is derived. It has to posit an 'overlap' between the two ages affecting Christian existence, which implies in moral terms a tension between living according to the conditions, standards of the old age—for Paul living 'according to the flesh'—and living according to the new age—'according to the Spirit' (Rom 8,5-11). Moral life for Paul is essentially opting to live 'according to the Spirit', that is, the sphere of influence emanating from the Risen Lord in the bodily conditions of the old age.[11]

The tug of the two ages: Romans 8

At this point I should like to focus more directly upon Romans 8. The chapter begins, as noted above, with Paul's announcement of the possibility of the new moral life created in Christians by the Spirit (8,1-13). In the rest of Romans 8 (vv 14-39) Paul confronts the problem of suffering, which along with the fact of death remains an aspect in which the old age is still around. His aim is to uphold the hope for the full implementation of the new age in the context of and to some extent precisely because of this suffering. The

theme is stated in verse 18, 'For I reckon that the sufferings of the present time are a small price to pay for the glory that is going to be revealed in us'.

Immediately there follows the striking passage concerning the 'groaning' of creation (vv 19–22).

> For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For creation was subjected to futility not by its own will but on account of the one who was meant to subdue it. And so the hope remained that the creation itself would be set free from its bondage to decay so as to share the freedom associated with the glory of the children of God. For we know that the entire creation has been groaning together in the pangs of childbirth right up till the present.

As we have seen above, central to the argument of this passage is the tradition derived from Genesis 1,26–27 of human responsibility for the non-human created world. Because of this responsibility the fate of the created world is locked together with that of its 'subduer': Adam.[12] For this reason it 'falls' when he sins (Gen 3,14); it falls into 'futility' (*matiotetes*)—the frustration of its original purpose in the design of God. By the same token, creation cherishes a hope that, should human relationship with God be restored to its rightful pattern, then it may itself be set free from this bondage imposed against its will.

Paul's presentation of 'creation' in this personified way relies heavily on mythic motifs derived from the apocalyptic tradition. The passage calls for imaginative rather than strictly literal exegesis. But it does effectively present a concept of the original vision of Genesis 1–2 coming true when human beings live out correctly in faith their proper eschatological relationship to the creator and the created world. In this way it embodies the 'ethic of responsibility' outlined above.

The human contribution to the new age

At the same time, the passage implies that Paul ascribes to human activity a role in the coming-to-be of the new age. While the future is God's gift of grace, it is not God's gift entirely apart from or independent of human co-operation. God exercises his saving fidelity to his creation when believers like Christ and in Christ live 'according to the Spirit'. His saving fidelity 'is fulfilled'

in and through them (Rom 8,3-4) when human beings 'subdue' the universe to the glory of God.

Thus the future no less than the past lies in human hands—for both good and ill. If the 'Adam' story of selfishness, plunder and going it alone over against God is allowed to run, then the effects of this will be manifest in the condition of the world. In an age of increasing technological capacity and control on the part of human beings, even the very destruction of the world can be envisaged. Through exchange of nuclear weapons or more gradual environmental devastation the *eschaton* of the apocalyptic scenarios can be 'realized' through the activities of the 'subduer'.[13] On the other hand, cooperation with grace allows for an unfolding of a future for the world that both enhances and provides a field of play for human dignity and destiny. Paul's question to us would seem to be: which story, the Adam story or the Christ story, are you going to let be the final story told in your life and your world?

The prophetic 'groaning'

I have been attempting to show that Paul's argument in Romans 8,18-22 recaptures the vision of Genesis 1,26-27 where human beings are assigned an essential responsibility for the world, and that this enters intrinsically into their relationship with God. Paul's main preoccupation in Romans 8 is, however, as we have noted, addressed to the 'overlap' situation of Christian eschatology. He indicates to those struggling with the remnant of the old age the grounds for hope that the 'grace' story is winning out and will win out. His first evidence for this has been the curious pointing to the 'groaning' of creation discussed above. His second in verses 23-25 focusses upon the 'groaning' of believers: 'Not only creation but we too, having the first fruits of salvation in the shape of the Spirit, groan with respect to ourselves, as we await full sonship, the redemption of our bodies' (verse 23). This statement is not without its textual and interpretative obscurities. But, along with several other passages in Paul (2 Cor 1,22; 5,5; cf Eph 1,14), it points to the gift of the Spirit as that which engenders hope in Christians. The Spirit engenders hope by bringing about a 'holy discontent', marked by a 'groaning' on our part. This is not so much a negative reaction to pain, but a positive restlessness with the present lot, a sense of and a longing for something better to come, something more in line with the promise of the new age.

If prophecy is a leading charism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12,28), then in terms of this statement in verse 23 the prophet is in a sense the archetypal 'groaner'. More acutely sensitive to the limitations of the present, the prophetic 'restlessness' witnesses to and points out the 'more' that is to come, calls attention to the fact that what we have at present does not fully measure up to the full dignity envisaged by God for human life.

This fullness intended by God includes bodily existence. It would be easy to understand Paul's final statement of what we wait for, 'the redemption of our bodies', to mean redemption *from* our bodies, as though the problem consisted in our bodily tie to the corporal, material world. But this would not be a correct interpretation of Paul's thought. Writing to the Corinthians, he insists upon the resurrection of the body in the new age; destiny to resurrection gives meaning and significance to life in the body here and now (1 Cor 6,13–14).[14] The existence of the new age is bodily existence—even if the precise nature of body transformed by the Spirit (*soma pneumatikon*) defies present imagination. 'Redemption of our bodies', then, means the liberation of bodily existence from the limitations of the old age and its total coming under the sway of the Spirit.

The prophetic task, then, does not play Spirit off against body. On the contrary, the prophet calls attention to the bodily needs of human beings precisely because of the sense of body transformed by the Spirit to which he or she is more particularly attuned.

The unseen hope

A remarkable feature of Paul's thought in this passage is his 'agnosticism' concerning the precise nature of the future hope. Paul who is so insistent *that* a new way of life lies ahead is equally insistent that *the nature* of the new life is not subject to present knowledge or imagination: 'A hope that is in sight is not really a hope at all. For who hopes for what is seen?' (8,24b). This aspect of Paul's eschatological thought in Romans represents a considerable development from that to be found in earlier letters such as 1 Thessalonians (cf 4,13–18) and even 1 Corinthians 15, which sits far more closely to the more 'other-worldly' scenarios of apocalyptic Judaism. There is a concentration here (already to be discerned in 1 Cor 5,1–5) upon the transformation 'on earth' in and around human beings themselves rather than upon trumpet

blasts and other more 'heavenly' features of the apocalyptic scenario. This lends to Paul's mature eschatological vision in Romans a notable openendedness about the future. It suggests an easing of the radical discontinuity between present and future existence which the more primitive apocalyptic view seemed to imply.

The impulse behind all this for Paul and the ultimate basis for hope is the unfolding of God's eternal design for human beings. It is this which the Spirit discerns and which he continually prays for in the hearts of Christians 'with groans beyond all utterance' (vv 26-28). The final pattern is that human beings 'be conformed to the image of his Son' (v 29), that is that they should be conformed to the fullness of life and humanity to be seen in the Risen Lord (Phil 3,21; 1 Cor 15,45-49; 2 Cor 3,17-18). As 'Last Adam' the Risen Christ is for Paul both the exemplar and the agent of the new humanity.[15] In him as perfect 'image' of God (2 Cor 4,4; cf Col 1,15) the vision of Genesis 1,26-27 becomes a reality when human beings are empowered by his Spirit to carry out the responsibility entrusted to them according to that foundational text.

Conclusion

We have moved rather swiftly through Paul's argument for Christian hope across Romans 8,18-30. It is time to reflect upon this more explicitly in the light of our present concern. I have suggested that Paul's vision is ultimately derivable from that of Genesis 1-2 and rests upon a conception of an eternally faithful God who is ever striving to realize that vision in the created world. The realization of that vision is ultimately the gift of God, the triumph of his grace. It is something which humans inhibit (through sin), but also something which is not brought about save through their cooperation with grace. The exemplar and paradigm of where we are going remains the humanity of the Risen Lord. The means of achieving it for ourselves and our world remain conformity in the Spirit to his obedience, the living-out of true human relationship before God.

My suggestion is that prophecy, as a particular manifestation of the Spirit's stirring within Christians, a notable Christian charism, has to do with a striving onwards towards the ultimate unseen vision. Prophets do not discern the ultimate goal any more clearly than other Christians. But they grow more restless with inhuman remnants of the old age. At the Spirit's prompting, they urge the

Christian vision of what is really human to take a further step forward. It is through prophets that the quantum leaps are made.

For many centuries slavery was not seen as incompatible with a Christian view of being human. It required prophets like William Wilberforce to make that point in the face of considerable opposition and cost. Today, in the context of nuclear weapons, prophets are questioning the notion of a 'just war'. Others are restless with the roles traditionally ascribed to woman in Church and society. In each sphere there is a quest for a fuller insight, a more integrated vision. Each step requires a leaving of the ties to the old age and a tasting of the new wine of the Kingdom. There is relinquishment and gain, a pattern of death and resurrection.

If, then, much prophetic word and action appears preoccupied with the present social condition, if it seems to focus very largely on what it finds to be inhumane, oppressive, inadequate in the present vision of humanity, then that is not at all at odds with what I take to be the Pauline vision. The Spirit's promptings are not confined to external ecstatic utterance, as in the gift of tongues, nor are they purely inward and personal. The challenging social gesture, the disturbing protest, even denunciation may reflect the 'groans beyond all utterance' Paul attributes to the Spirit. They may also reflect unspiritual reaction and rage; discernment is equally a Christian gift and task (1 Cor 14,29). But, when prophecy points to present structures of inhumanity, carries out its 'worldly witness', it fulfils a key Christian role. The shock, the tug of prophecy is part of the Spirit's prompting to new visions, new ways in which Christian responsibility for the new age is, under God's grace, to be discharged.

NOTES

[1] For a fuller treatment of Paul's idea of the saving fidelity or righteousness of God and its origins in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition see my recent popular exposition of Romans, *Reckoning with Romans: contemporary reading of Paul's gospel* (Wilmington, DE, Glazier, 1986), esp pp 42-48.

[2] See *ibid.*, pp 86, pp 219-21.

[3] The same motif appears in developed poetic form in Psalm 8,5-6, a text important for Paul in christological and eschatological contexts: cf 1 Cor 15,25-28; Phil 3,20-21; also (cf discussion below) Rom 8,20; cf also Eph 1,22; Heb 2,6-8.

[4] It is in Rom 5,12-21 that this 'Adam-Christ' contrast is most explicitly to be seen, but there are many indications that it is running in other passages besides: for example, Rom 1,18-32; 6,1-11; 7,7-25; 8,19-22. Cf M. D. Hooker, *Pauline pieces* (London, Epworth, 1979), pp 36-52.

[5] *Reckoning with Romans*, pp 224–27.
[6] Cf *ibid.*, pp 134–47.
[7] Cf *ibid.*, pp 148–54; more fully argued in B. J. Byrne, 'Living out the righteousness of God', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 43 (1981) pp 557–81, esp pp 565–70.
[8] The classic discussion of 'spiritual gift' in Paul comes in the essay of E. Käsemann, 'Ministry and community in the New Testament' in *Essays on New Testament themes* (London: SCM, 1964) pp 63–94, see esp pp 63–85.
[9] For a fuller discussion of Paul's eschatology and its background see *Reckoning with Romans* pp 20–25.
[10] 'Body' (*soma*) for Paul means primarily the physical body, but the Greek word conveys rich overtones not present in the simple translation. 'Body' for Paul is essentially that whereby I am in touch, in communication with the outside world of persons and events both to give and receive impressions. As 'body' I am a being with a whole network of associations and relationships. Whereas 'flesh' belongs essentially to the old age and cannot be part of the new (cf 1 Cor 15,50: 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingom of God'), bodily existence can transfer from one to the other via resurrection. Thus Paul can speak of 'body transformed by the Spirit' (*soma pneumatikon*: 1 Cor 15,44). Fuller treatment in *Reckoning with Romans* pp 130–131 ('body'); pp 142–43 ('flesh').
[11] For the use of 'overlap' to describe this aspect of Paul's terminology I am indebted to J. D. G. Dunn, 'Jesus—flesh and Spirit: an exegesis of Romans 1,3–4', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 24 (1973) pp 40–68, see p 52.
[12] Taking the reference to the 'subduer' in v 20 to be to Adam (or human beings in general) rather than to God; cf *Reckoning with Romans* pp 166–67.
[13] A key thesis of J. Garrison's powerful work: *The darkness of God: theology after Hiroshima* (London, SCM, 1982) pp 92–117.
[14] I discuss this more fully in an article to appear in the *Downside Review*, entitled 'Eschatologies of resurrection and destruction: the ethical significance of Paul's dispute with the Corinthians'.
[15] On this see especially R. Scroggs, *The Last Adam: a study in Pauline anthropology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1966) pp 92–112.