

Homily – 10th December 2017 – 6 pm

This morning I was speaking about the role of the prophets in being a signpost. In speaking God's word, seeing the world through God's eyes and guiding people towards the right path – in the direction of Jesus.

This evening's Old Testament reading presents something of an additional challenge – and unfortunately it's a challenge that we can't really avoid. The King of Israel seeks the advice of his prophets in order to make a decision about going into battle with King Jehoshaphat, and all of the prophets – about 400 of them – appear to be agreed that he should go into battle because God will be on his side and he will win. Yet King Jehoshaphat remains dubious and asks if there are any other prophets. The King of Israel acknowledges that there is one other, Micaiah, but he hates him because he always prophesies against him.

And so Micaiah is called and although he initially follows the party line, when pushed he says that he actually foresees disaster if they go into battle. And he goes on to explain that the other prophets are only saying what they do because they have been enticed to do so by a lying spirit.

Well, the next part of the story is that they do indeed go into battle, yet the King of Israel goes in disguise, perhaps unsettled by Micaiah's prophecy. Nevertheless, he is killed by a stray arrow.

And the challenge to us is this. How do we know the truth from falsehood? How do we recognise the truly prophetic voices from those which are not – from the false prophets. Sometimes when we read from the Bible it can seem as though it is perfectly obvious where we find the Word of God, it is perfectly obvious what we should do.

But here there is no mistaking the message. It isn't always obvious. The challenges we have at times in finding the path to follow are real challenges – because we cannot always trust everything we hear.

Which makes it all the more ironic that the New Testament reading speaks of abounding hope. Such hope can surely feel quite difficult to hold on to.

So what is it, I wonder, that helps us to keep hopeful in an uncertain world? What is it that helps us to distinguish the prophetic voices from those that might lead us astray?

The Church of England can help us, I think, since our theological understanding is based always on a balance of scripture, reason and tradition. So we can undoubtedly find wisdom and guidance in the scriptures. Nevertheless our interpretation must always be open to question – we must always use our God-given intelligence to make sense of what we are reading. And the tradition of the Church has always encouraged us to meet with others, to share our faith and allow our own interpretations to be discussed with and challenged by others – not because they are always right, but in order to discern where God might be leading us.

Church tradition – and indeed the scriptures themselves – also counsel prayer. Time spent listening to God, deliberately bringing our questions before God.

None of this makes our path through life easy, neither does it guarantee that we do not go astray. But perhaps it offers a framework – and indeed fellow travellers – to help keep our hope alive.

Amen