

## The Vocation of a Prophet

Mark 6.1-13

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July 9, 2006

*Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*

*Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

[Douglas Adams](#), the author of “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, used the phrase, "Anything that happens, happens. Anything that in happening causes something else to happen, causes something else to happen. Anything that in happening happens again, happens again. Though not necessarily in that order."

The late comedian [Alan King](#) used to tell this story: His lawyer asked him if he had ever drawn up a will. Alan said "No". The lawyer, in shock and horror, said, "If you died without a will, you would die [intestate!](#)" *The lawyer then charged him \$500 for his advice.* Alan looked up the word “*intestate*” and found that it means "to die without a will". *He thought to himself:* "In other words, if I die without a will, then I'll die without a will. This legal pearl cost me \$500!"

These are two examples of something we call in logic a “tautology”. A tautology means a repetition of something that is the same as something else. For example, when I say a "free gift", "helpful assistance", or "new innovation, I’m using a tautology. It often happens in foreign languages: "[Chai](#) Tea" (the Hindi word for *Tea* is “chai”), "[Sahara Desert](#)" (the Arabic word for *desert* is pronounced “Sahara”), [East Timor](#) (the Malay word for *east* is “Timur”).<sup>1</sup>

Tautology is also used when you say something that is close to being a repetition because it is so obvious: “those rain clouds mean rain”; “that flat tire sure is flat”.

Jesus’ famous words that you just heard are very close to being a tautology: “a prophet is not worth honour unless it be in his homeland, or hometown”. Why? Because prophets are only prophets in their homeland and because they are never received well, otherwise they would never be prophets.

Let me explain.

There are lot of misunderstandings concerning what it means to be a prophet.

Some think that a prophet is best described by how he looks: long hair, dressed shabbily or minimally. He looks like what you imagine John the Baptist to have looked like, or more likely he looks like the character in the cartoon holding the sign saying, “end of the world is near”. But, nothing in Scripture says that all prophets are to look like John the Baptist.

Nor does anything in Scripture say that prophets walk around with signs telling us the future, usually that the end of the world is near. Yet, many people only think of a prophet as someone who tells the future, usually a negative one.

But, what then is a prophet that will help you to see why Jesus’ words are almost a tautology. A simple way to think of what a prophet is the prophet is a person who helps the people of God get back on track when they have strayed and fallen into a rut that takes them further and further away from God.

**First**, a prophet is not a person who tells the people of God anything new. He is not there to set forth a new law. He is called forth by God and then sent by God to remind the people of God who have strayed

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<sup>1</sup> These examples can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tautology\\_\(rhetoric\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tautology_(rhetoric)). In the case of the Alan King quote, the italics represent my addition.

from the right path what the right path is and to put them back on the right path of understanding and obeying the Law as God has given it.

You might say: “ah, a teacher”. Well, close, but not exactly. I’m a teacher, but I’m not a prophet. A teacher, like the scribes in the Gospels, takes the written Word of God and expounds from it, helping the people to keep on track and calling them back to what God has revealed to them. This is in fact what the Pharisees were doing.

Because, **second**, a prophet is not just one who expounds what everyone can read in the text and reminds people who can’t read or haven’t read what they are supposed to find there. A prophet is one who calls the people of God back to a path from which they have strayed even when they are reading the Word of God regularly because the prophet has privileged access to the counsel of God. The prophet knows not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law because the prophet is one who is privileged to walk with, to talk with, and to commune with God, as God wills. But, he does so not for some personal benefit – for his spirituality, or to write a book about it – but for the sake of his people, his hometown crowd.

You might say, “but how does a person have this access to God’s counsel?” Scripture tells us that prophets are not just anyone, but that they are called by God. It is not a vocation in the way we think of it but a real vocation, which is what the word “vocation” means, a calling. In this case, the one doing the calling is God.

And, once called, they are schooled. There were the schools of the prophets, where the prophets practiced spiritual disciplines of prayer, and meditation. They were also schooled by being put by God in nearly impossible situations and forced to rely on God for the answers. Think of Daniel in the fiery furnace, in the lion’s den, having to interpret the King’s dream. Think of Elijah on Mt. Carmel facing the hoards of false prophets of Baal. Think of Jeremiah, preaching the exile of his people while everyone wanted him to preach the “real” word of God, which they thought was peace. And when he didn’t preach peace, they wanted him dead.

But, **third**, in all of these cases, the prophet was one who sought the mind of God alone and relied on God alone to provide evidence that God was with him with one goal: to bring the people of God, his people, back to their God, his God. A prophet does not go to another land to announce something that the people have never heard before. That is the job of the missionary and of the evangelist as we understand it. A prophet is called out from his own people and sent back to his own people.

This is the first reason why Jesus’ words are close to being a tautology: a prophet is not sent to anyone else but his own people. In the reading from Mark, the people of Jesus’ hometown recognize that: Yes, this is his father’s own son, the carpenter, just like his father; yes, this is Mary’s son; yes, his brothers and his sisters are right here with us. We know that he is one of us.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Note that Jesus limits his ministry to “his own people”. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this means that his prophetic ministry takes place in his homeland, Galilee, while in John’s Gospel “his own” implies that his ministry is to all of his “kin”, that is, Jews throughout Israel, and possibly even beyond the borders of Israel. One might suggest that there is an exception to the rule that a prophet speaks to his own people in the book of Jonah, in which the “prophet” eventually goes to the land of Nineveh at God’s request to preach repentance, which they do. But, in fact, as the end of that book shows, the **real** need for repentance is in fact in Jonah’s heart, and conceivably in other like-minded Jews, who believe that God is not the God of other nations, but only a tribal god, the God of Israel. Getting Israel to return to an understanding of God as the God of all nations is actually the point of that prophetic book.

But, **finally**, the reason why Jesus' words were obvious, because they were almost a tautology, is because a prophet is not sent to people who have got it right and are on track. A prophet is sent to his own people who are straying with a message to come back. So it is very unlikely that they will be happy to see one of their own, calling them to task for what they are doing. They are unlikely to start honouring him.

The first thing that they will probably say is: "I haven't done anything! I'm not guilty! Don't look at me! I'm in the synagogue right now worshipping, right? So, don't tell me that I am not right with the Lord."

A prophet has to be someone special because it's very hard to get your own people who have been moving away from God for so long back on the right path. You all know what a rut is. Do you know how hard it is to get even a big vehicle out of a rut! It takes someone very special in this case.

But, though it takes someone very special, the message is very simple. Remember the prophet is not saying anything new. The prophet is simply calling the people of God back to what God had originally called them to.

- The prophet will remind the people of God that there is not one who is righteous, no matter how much you do for the Lord, no matter how often you find yourself in the gathering of His people. Maybe the rut is that they think that they alone of everyone are righteous. The prophet will remind them that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all that you have, and that no one does that perfectly.
- The prophet will remind them that they are to love the ones with whom they rub shoulders regularly – their neighbours – in the same way that they love themselves and their families. Maybe the rut that they have fallen in to is a rancorous spirit that means that they think only of themselves first and want everyone else to conform to their will, maybe even saying it's because I'm the husband, or because I'm the parent, or because I'm the elder.

Do we have prophets around us? Well, the churches from which you and I come – Reformed in your case and Anglican in mine – are churches that have their roots in the prophetic announcement to the people of God in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the people of God were not adhering to the Word of the Lord. God raised up prophets in those days who, like the disciples at the end of the Gospel reading this morning, went forth into their own hometowns and into the places where they had been raised and announced the true will of the Lord.

The positive side of heeding the Word of the Lord that comes through His prophets is that the people who do find that the Lord once again makes His healing and abundant life-giving presence felt in their midst. They once again reap the benefits of being the Lord's people. The people that heeded the prophetic word spoken in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were blessed, as were their children.

But, the negative side, not heeding the Word of the Lord, is that there are consequences to being the Lord's people and not heeding His commandments. The consequences start small, but they build until your situation is much, much worse than it was, and even than that of those around you.

The first consequence will be one that you don't see until it's too late: evidence of the Lord's presence with you will be missing. Where the people of God have gone astray and have not heeded the word of the

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Lord, people “out there” have said: “oh, those Christians; they’re no different from us or from anyone else. Oh, they may talk a different language, wear different clothes, do different things, but they suffer and complain about the same things and look and curse and live the same life that you and I do”.

But this is only the first step to what I call not ritual Christianity but “rutual” Christianity: living in a rut. Because living in a rut that takes you away from God also leads you on a path that will take you all the way from being no different from the others around you to eventually being even worse than them. Do I need to remind you that the religious wars that followed the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were among the worst that we have known for their violence and their cruelty. They were similar in horror and violence to the stories we hear coming out of Iraq today. When people either do not heed the prophetic word or heed it and then go back to their old lives, the situation will not just be bad; it will be horrific and those who call themselves “people of God” will be acting like the embodiment of evil itself.

My friends, I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. But I know this:

Our Lord Jesus Christ was the perfect model of a prophet. He did not come to announce anything new to the people, but rather the old, old story of God’s great love for the world.

Where He and those He sent forth were believed, blessing upon blessing followed.

But, He was not successful everywhere, especially in his hometown. And that was and still is the fate of His followers. As the prophets of old had suffered, so, too, Jesus suffered... rejection, unbelief, and finally death.

But, that’s where the parallels end. Because the death that Jesus suffered, he suffered not just as a prophet, but also as a priest and a king. He offered Himself as priest, once and for all, both priest and sacrifice. And he gave Himself for His people as a King, dying for His people, so that they would not have to die.

And He entrusted to us, His followers, the task of continuing His prophetic work, which in our case is not just to tell people to “come back or else” but to help people find their way back to one who is infinitely merciful and patient, to one with whom alone they can find healing and blessing, to help them back to their true prophet, true priest, true king.