

# Comment

## *A Need for Prophets*

Most revolutions are a shock. Only the prophet is unsurprised by them; not because prophets foretell the future, but because they can read the signs of the times. The prophet is faithful to reality. The prophet's life bridges the gap between the way things are and how they ought to be; it is an enacted parable; he is a human image that carries a divine disclosure. The prophets uncover in their own lives, in the pattern of significance that emerges from the most unlikely materials, from turbulent events and turbulent emotions, the expression of God's compassion for his people. The prophet sees in the unfolding of his life the sacrament or image of that compassion. Prophets find themselves at the point of encounter between two realities: things as they are and things as they are called to be in the transparency of grace. In these circumstances his life is characterised by agony, by struggle. Every one who takes up the prophet's mantle shares in the experience of agony; we have all known our own garden of Gethsemani. In responding to this experience the prophets reveal God to be the artist of their lives. They speak a transforming word clothed in the vocabulary of human experience. The prophetic word is powerful and authoritative when spoken to the brokenness of the people because the prophet too shares in that experience of brokenness.

In the Old Testament the prophetic witness was at its most powerful when the people of God were in exile in Babylon. During the exile the community knew a devastating sense of loss; family ties and possessions, ancestral homes and property were lost. The Temple and its worship were destroyed and the security of their political system was obliterated. They described this experience as being broken-hearted. Their sense of homelessness provoked deep grief and a feeling of bereavement. In the midst of this experience the prophets of the exile began to paint a pattern of significance. A sense of home was preserved through an appeal to history and a sense of hope for the future. Cynicism and despair are the frequent response to exile and homelessness. Memory without hope leaves no place for reconciliation. In these circumstances the prophets turned the people towards their ancestors in whom the contemporary meaning of their history was revealed. 'Consider the rock you were hewn from, the quarry from which you were cut.' (Is. 51. 1-2) The prophets invite the people to recover their memory; in recovering their memory they recover their Identity. That process of return and recollection is one of repentance and reconciliation.

The prophetic mission is essentially the ministry of reconciliation.

In 1981 the religious of the world were reminded that: 'The "signs of the times" offer an incentive for the renewal of the evangelical options of the religious life.' Religious are called upon to bear special witness to the prophetic dimension of the Church's ministry. 'For the Church, to evangelize is to carry the good news to all sections of humanity and by its influence to transform humanity itself from within: the criteria of judgement, the dominant values, the sources of inspiration, the life-styles, opening them to an integral vision of humanity.' The prophetic response to the crisis of the human person, which lies at the heart of so much of modern experience, should not be an easy moralism or simple aggressive criticism; it must be the witness of the martyr; an incarnate expression of true humanity which is our resurrection into true freedom, the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Our religious communities are called to be the leaven in a Europe which has eaten of the bread of affliction. We have shared in its exile and been touched by its grief. Many of the familiar certainties of our own way of life have perished. Some of our congregations are facing the prospect of death, many question whether their apostolate and witness has been worthwhile. A grief denied is a destructive grief. In avoiding grief we attempt to cling on to the structures and forms of a past life, punishing our descendants with our nostalgia for an experience which is alien to them. In our denial we betray our own fear of death and our lack of faith that unless a grain of wheat die. . . Along with our denial goes anger and depression a hopelessness which extinguishes the joy which belongs to all who are seduced by the gospel.

The religious life began as a radical alternative to life in the world. Christians who embraced it were often regarded as atheists by their contemporaries because they would not worship the gods of the state, the social community or economic policy. Over the centuries religious life became an established institution at the heart of the world instead of an alternative to it. As the foundations of that world which we have helped to build are shaken it is no surprise that we share in the disturbance. As prophets no other course is open to us.

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