

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 8, 2013
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Advent Prophets

In every age prophets have stirred up the world. In ancient liturgies, the words “stir up”, “excite”, “rouse” – all from the Latin root word “excita” – were found in every Advent collect. In our current Prayer Book, the collect for the Third Sunday of Advent begins, “*Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...*” In earlier editions of the Prayer Book, the collect for the Sunday before the start of Advent began with the words, “*Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of the faithful people...*” And this Sunday was known as “stir up Sunday.” Advent is an exciting season, a season when God’s love stirs us up, largely because of the message of the prophets, a message of judgment and of hope.

Isaiah is the first prophet of Advent; he tells us about the coming Messiah, “*the root of Jesse.*” Prophets always “*speak truth to power.*” Isaiah spoke to the Kings of Israel and Judah who had entered into a disastrous alliance with Assyria in the eighth century before the coming of Christ. These monarchs were so set on war, they were so comfortable with oppression and injustice that the prophet proclaimed a vision of a righteous king, one who would be wise, understanding, filled with the Spirit of God. This king would bring peace and justice for all. Isaiah’s vision became a reality for the second prophet of Advent, John the Baptist.

John was raised knowing the Old Testament prophets’ message of repentance and change. This new way of life was the only way to prepare for the Kingdom of Heaven and the coming of the Lord. John preached truth to the powerful: Herod, the political leader, and the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes, who came for baptism, ritual washing, purification, and to prepare for the King and his Kingdom. John certainly stirred up “*the people of Jerusalem and all Judea.*” They came out into the wilderness to hear his message of judgment and hope even as they desired baptism.

John’s message and ministry remind us that Advent is a time to prepare, to look ahead, to change our assumptions about God. Jesus said that John was more than a prophet (Matthew 11:7-11). Jesus came to John for baptism. Jesus’ first disciples came from among the Baptist’s disciples. John’s influence was so strong, even after Herod executed him, that his disciples continued to follow his teachings for several generations. Judgment and hope, repentance and preparation, speaking truth to power, this is the prophetic message of Advent, this all too short season before we celebrate Christmas.

Of course, Jesus also spoke truth to power. He was both a prophet and a teacher. He carried this message of judgment, hope and the coming of the Kingdom of God right into the center of power for both Israel and Rome – right into Jerusalem. His Prophetic message, his Advent of God’s Reign, so threatened the High Priests and Pharisees, as well as Pontius Pilate, that they conspired together, Israel’s religious leadership and Rome’s political leadership, to crucify Jesus.

Speaking truth to power; proclaiming judgment and hope, living Kingdom values, lead to conflict, persecution, even death.

The church has taken up this Advent ministry for 21 centuries. Many of our Saints have been prophets – Paul, Augustine, Francis, William Laud, Martin Luther, Father Edward Pusey and the Oxford Reformers – speaking truth to power, proclaiming God’s righteousness, working for justice and peace, celebrating the Kingdom of God breaking down the earthly kingdoms of oppression, of violence, of injustice.

Perhaps it is a true celebration of Advent this year that Nelson Mandela’s long life has finally ended. How many prophetic voices have there been in the last 100 years? Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, Mandela: who else would be on your list?

I was not surprised to learn that Mandela’s mother was a devout Christian. She sent her son to a Methodist school and he was baptized and given the English first name “Nelson.” His formal education, while heavily influenced by British colonial rule, included Christian formation through college. As an emerging political leader in his early 30’s he refused to be linked with the Communist movement in South Africa because of their avowed Atheism and because, for Mandela, the struggle in South Africa was about race, not about class. During his 27 years in prison he led Sunday services, studied the *Bible*, and also studied Islamic and Afrikaner traditions and beliefs. He never lost sight of his African roots, but he moved beyond tribe, nation and race.

Archbishop Tutu’s essay last Friday, “The Moral Courage of Nelson Mandela” states that Mandela’s 27 years in prison “*deepened his compassion and capacity to empathize with others...*” He “*set aside bitterness.*” After his release and, as the first black President of South Africa, Mandela preached, lived and governed by forgiveness and reconciliation. Tutu ends his essay by asking,

Was he a Saint? Not if a Saint is entirely flawless. I believe he was saintly because he inspired others powerfully, and revealed in his character, transparently, many of God’s attributes of goodness: compassion, concern for others, a desire for peace, and forgiveness and reconciliation...”

Another Advent prophet leaves this life by asking us how and when will we speak God’s truth to power? How and when will we live by the Kingdom standards of forgiveness, reconciliation, judgment and hope? How and when will we proclaim “*the coming of the Lord*”?

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12