

What Is Our Prophetic Progressive Christian Voice?

This is the contemporary word delivered at St James Uniting Church, Curtin, ACT Australia.

Based on the Readings

Luke 4:14-21 1

Corinthians 12:12-20

Introduction

I'm not sure if what Jesus is reported to have said in the Gospels are actually his words, but they sound to me like something he might say.

Like the prophets of old, he had come with belief, a message, a fire in his belly and he intended on being heard.

Without stealing Piers thunder for next week, just like the prophets of old, the people rejected Jesus' message. Jesus went on to say that a prophet is never welcome in their own home. This followed the historical pattern of Israel, where the word of the prophets was only ever posthumously recognised as what they called the word of God.

In modern times, a prophet generally refers to someone who can divine the future, maybe such as Nostradamus. A prophet in the Bible was a very different concept. A prophet was someone who had deep ethics, morals and convictions. They often stood apart from both the established political and religious traditions, and spoke freely to them and against them. Accordingly, they were often unpopular with the authorities.

In our liberal Christian tradition, we have also had our prophets, many who were also rejected in their own time, and also only posthumously recognised, just like Jesus and the prophets of old.

I think we need to recognise these prophets, who in their own way, just like Jesus, brought good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives and freedom to the oppressed. Let me start with Paul Tillich.

Paul Tillich

Tillich was born in 1886 in Germany. In 1912 he was ordained a Lutheran Minister, and in 1933 moved to the USA, where he later became an American Citizen. In 1955 was appointed as one of only five professors at Harvard University, before moving the University of Chicago in 1962. He died following a heart attack in October, 1965.

He is regarded as one of the great theologians of the last century. Thousands would go to hear him speak. He wrote two particularly famous works, *The Courage to Be*

in 1952, and the *Dynamics of Faith* in 1957. In these books, he introduced issues of theology and modern culture to a general readership.

It would be impossible for me in this short time to cover the breadth of Tillich's theology. What I want to do is focus on his theology in regards to God.

Tillich did not believe in the traditional theistic God, which sees God as the highest being to which attributes such as omnipotence (being all powerful), omnipresence (being all present) and omniscience (being all knowing) can be ascribed.

Tillich argued that if God was a being, God could then not also be the source of all being, which then leads to questions about who created God, when was God was created and why God exists. It rules God out as the ultimate creator.

Rather, Tillich understood God as the "Ground of Being", beyond Being-Itself. God is the ground upon which all beings exist.

Tillich believed that belief in God as a being was unable to speak to the doubt, anxiety and despair humans experience as a result of being finite, or a mixture of being and non-being. He saw this as the primary problem of the modern age.

If God is not the ground of being itself, then God cannot provide an answer to the question of finitude as God would also be finite in some sense. God, as the ground of being, helps us to have the courage to be and to overcome and conquer non-being and meaninglessness.

The question then becomes whether, and in what way, personal language about God and humanity's relationship to God is appropriate. Tillich disagreed with any literal philosophical and religious statements about God, which he believed lead to anthropomorphism and set limits against the transcendent. He believed any statements about God are simply symbolic, but that these symbols are sacred in the sense that they help us participate in or point to the Ground of Being.

Tillich was a forerunner to Bishop John Robinson, who famously wrote *Honest to God* to a storm of controversy in 1963. Robinson said that we should not look for a God up there or out there, but as the Ground of Being.

Someone many of us will be familiar with, John Shelby Spong, has consistently nominated Bishop John Robinson as one of his early and primary influences. You can hear echoes of both Tillich and Robinson in Spong's belief of God as the source of love, the source of life and the source of being, and that we enter God when we live fully, love wastefully and be all that we can be.

Now let me move onto Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in February 1906 in Germany.

He began his theological studies in 1923 and furthered them in New York in 1930. In the US, Bonhoeffer first experienced the Gospel of Social Justice within the black Harlem community. He became sensitive not only to social injustices experienced by minorities, but also the inability of the church to bring about social integration and change.

In 1931, at the age of 25, he returned to Germany and was ordained a Lutheran Pastor. He was also appointed a lecturer of theology at the University of Berlin.

On his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer underwent what appears to be a personal conversion. He was transformed from being an intellectual theologian to being a man committed to living out the teaching of Christ.

At this time, German Lutheranism had a doctrine of two kingdoms. According to this doctrine, the state exerted its sovereignty in secular matters, whilst the church had the exclusive task of preaching the gospel with an emphasis on belief without interference by the State.

This theology meant that the State had complete freedom to disregard the ethics of the Gospel in pursuit of its aims, and that the Church had no right of admonition of the State if it considered the State had gone beyond its brief and violated human rights.

In Bonhoeffer's time, these beliefs combined in pre-WW2 Germany to create a Church that not only turned a blind eye to the evils of Nazism, but in many ways endorsed and promoted it.

In 1937, Bonhoeffer published perhaps his greatest work, "The Cost of Discipleship". In it, he makes a distinction between what he calls "costly grace" and "cheap grace".

Bonhoeffer states "cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

Bonhoeffer's God is a suffering God, whose manifestation is found within the world in which we live. He believed the Church had become too "secularised" and accommodating of the requirements of society rather than the demands of Jesus.

To Bonhoeffer, the incarnation of God in Jesus made it unacceptable to speak of God and the world "in terms of two spheres". This was an implicit attack upon Luther's

doctrine of the two kingdoms. In this way, Bonhoeffer became a revolutionary against the very religious institution that formed him.

Bonhoeffer believed the Christians' should be the imitation of Christ, and that they should not retreat from the world but act within it. Doing this would bring around the implementation of justice. He stated that the church "had to share in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world" if it were to be the true church of Christ.

These beliefs led Bonhoeffer to be a strident opponent of Nazism, and in particular the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, throughout the 1930s.

In 1933, he moved to London to promote Church ecumenicalism and to rally people to oppose the German Christian movement and its attempt to amalgamate Nazi nationalism with the Christian gospel.

In 1934, he became a founding member of the Confessing Church, which was formed in opposition to the German Christians.

He returned to Germany in 1935 to head an underground seminary for the Confessing Church but was forced into Switzerland after persistent Nazi persecution. In 1936, he was declared by Germany as a pacifist and enemy of the State.

During 1936 and 1937, Bonhoeffer secretly travelled from one eastern German village to another to conduct "seminary on the run" for the Confessing Church. By August 1937, Himmler decreed the education and examination of Confessing Church ministry candidates was illegal. In September 1937, the Gestapo closed the Confessing Church seminary and by November had arrested 27 pastors and former students.

In 1938, the Gestapo banned Bonhoeffer from Berlin.

As Germany prepared for war in 1939, Bonhoeffer left for the USA, worried that his refusal as a pacifist to accept conscription would cost him his life and the reputation of the confessing Church. However, he soon decided this was a mistake, believing that he had to live through this difficult period of time with his people.

On his return, Bonhoeffer was forbidden to speak in public or to publish, and was required to report his activities to the police. During this time, he became a member of the anti-Hitler movement and became involved in plans to assassinate Hitler. The guilt of this decision weighed heavily on his conscience.

After the failure of the plot on Hitler's life in 1944 and the discovery of Bonhoeffer's connection with the conspirators, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and then later moved to a concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging on 9 April 1945, just two weeks before the USA liberated the camp.

Bonhoeffer's theology, life, and final martyrdom in opposition to Nazism has exerted great influence and inspiration for Christians across broad denominations and ideologies. These include Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the anti-communist democratic movement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. The former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, nominated Bonhoeffer as one of his great influences. We stand on the shoulders of giants.

Let me now turn to someone who might just turn out to be a modern day prophet.

Gretta Vosper

Gretta Vosper is the Pastor of West Hill United Church in Toronto and Chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Theology.

She wrote a profound book in 2008 called 'With Or Without God: Why The Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe'.

Vosper perceives Christianity as a human construction. That is, humans created the concept of God, the image of Jesus passed down through the Church, the Bible, doctrines, dogmas, traditions, the Church, the ecclesiastical authority structure, even heaven and hell.

Vosper believes that all the signals indicate that the Church and the Christian Faith in its current construction has outlived its viability. We have held onto institutions and traditions until they no longer make sense for most of us, until we no longer recognise them as meaningful.

The good news is that because Christianity is a human construction, you and I can also be co-creators in a new Christian story.

Vosper says "we need to release words, statements, and concepts that reiterate dogma we no longer truly believe ourselves" and to "boldly, comfortably, and confidently write our own sacred wisdom again, this time gleaning from scripture all that in life enhancing, but none that is not, discovering new and not so new spiritual expressions that come to us from other traditions and ideologies, and stretching ourselves to seek new sources of inspiration".

In regards to the Bible, Vosper states that it only has the spiritual meaning and value that we give it, and that we should choose those parts to keep and those parts to leave behind.

In regards to God, Vosper has gone as far as to not use the term "God" because of its links with theism and traditional Christianity, but uses over 100 alternate names.

To do this rethinking and retooling, Vosper states that we must create new forms of celebrating and new ways to honour life's holy moments. We must foster communities of faith that speak a language that is open to intellectual exploration, spiritual quest, and whatever experiences of the divine are brought to them. We need to encourage critical thinking and gather people together to engage in a conversation about the big things, issues that matter, such as values, meaning, relationships.

To achieve this, Vosper believes it is essential for the Church to have an open mind, passion, creativity, intellectual vigour, honesty, courage, respect and patience. I think these are values we would do well to measure ourselves against.

St James Uniting Church, Curtin ACT Australia

We, on the liberal side of Christianity, certainly have a prophetic and social justice tradition to be proud of. I don't agree with everything that Tillich, Bonhoeffer or Vosper write. That's not the point. The point is that they make us think. Reassess. Cause us to change.

We should also recognise the many secular prophetic voices of the last century, but also in our times: Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Mandela, Germaine Greer, David Suzuki, Tim Costello, Tim Flannery, and many more.

But the essential question for us today is, what, as a Church community, is our prophetic voice? What is our social justice cause? What is our place in the world?

At the beginning of this new year, we as a community are face an uncertain future. This presents both threats and opportunities. We can either bunker down and simply maintain what we have been doing, or we can move forward with an open mind, passion, creativity, intellectual vigour, honesty, courage, respect and patience into new ways of seeing and being.

In regards to a prophetic voice, St James used to be on the forefront of liberal Christian thinking. I think we have lost that position.

In particular, I find it sad that the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought has declined like it has, despite the hard work of Linda. It was a valuable outreach for St James to both Church exiles and to other progressive Christians committed to their own more traditional Churches. This is something I believe we need to address.

We need to once again take up the baton of progressive theology with vigour. I would like to see St James as a Church that is a centre of discussion and debate about both theology and social values, and that expresses these through both its liturgy and the arts.

That is why today you have been provided with what has been called 'The Canberra Affirmation', and why we are exploring a section of it each Sunday over six weeks. It was debated and written by the evening congregation in . It is a call to arms. It is a call for us as a community of faith to constantly challenge, re-evaluate, but also reinforce, those things that we value and believe.

Let me now speak about inclusion. This weeks Affirmation states:

"We acknowledge that a transformative path of inclusion and integrity involves living responsible and compassionate lives in community with others.

Such a path asks us to adopt values supporting social equality and connectedness.

It entails non-violent peacemaking and considered forgiveness.

It invites passion and action for social justice, and stewardship of the earth and all its life forms. It encourages humour, challenge, and acts of generosity.

At its centre is an awareness of oneness: one with the 'sacred', with ourselves, with others, with the universe".

One of the strengths of St James is its commitment to inclusion. And yet, I believe, we have not yet gone far enough.

I do not believe we have created a comfortable space for spiritual exploration and community for those between the ages of 13 and 40. Indeed, since I joined this Church, Network Y has shrunk from about 15 to 20 people who used to gather each month, to myself, Rodney and Michelle. We need people of this age to continually renew and grow the congregation. Creating a vibrant space for this age group is another challenge I believe we must face with honesty, creativity and even a sense of courage.

And finally, in regards to social justice, I think we need to decide on a cause that the St James congregation, in partnership with Uniting Care, can fully get behind and support. I look forward to seeing what new ventures the Social Justice Group will get up to this year, and I look forward to the Church community supporting them in this.

Jesus stated that he had come to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, free to captives and freedom to the oppressed. It is our challenge to figuratively do the same.

We can do this. It will require an open mind, passion, creativity, intellectual vigour, honesty, courage, respect. It will require us to support each other through good times and bad. As it stated in the reading from the book of Corinthians, we are one body with many parts, each with a vital role to play. We are a great community and I believe we have a great and vibrant future. We can have a prophetic voice. We can help the world through a passion for social justice.

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Luke 4:14-21

4:14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

4:15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

4:17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

4:20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

12:13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

12:15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

12:18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

12:19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?

12:20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.