

UNWELCOME PROPHETS

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A STORY IS TOLD of a travelling circus camped on the outskirts of a town in rural NSW. One evening, shortly before show time, a fire broke out. The manager sent the clown, who was already dressed for his act, to ask the townspeople's help putting out the blaze and to warn them that it could spread to the village. But the people only laughed at him: they thought it was a brilliant ruse to interest them in the circus. They laughed and applauded his antics, but because they didn't take the messenger seriously they couldn't hear his message. By the time the bushfire reached the town it was too late and all was lost.

Something similar happened to Jesus when he returned home (*Mk* 6:1-6). On tour he'd made a big impact but his own now rejected Him. So he made his famous declaration that *a prophet is not honoured in his own town*, words that have become proverbial in many cultures. Why did this happen? Well, one reason might be that they were too familiar with him. They thought they knew him all too well. He wasn't anything special and he had nothing to say that they didn't know already.

Some of you might know the writings of the American vampire novelist Anne Rice who, after years as an avowed atheist had a brief reversion to the Catholic faith of her childhood, and took some time out writing historical fiction about the life of Jesus. After selling one hundred million books in the vampire and evangelical Christian markets, she spun back out of orbit, declaring herself pro-Christ but anti-Christian. Christians were just too quarrelsome and judgmental, she thought, not gay-friendly, feminist-friendly, Democrat-friendly

or even vampire friendly. But her legacy—*Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*—is a good read. In an author's postscript she explained that she had long found the non-divine Jesus of secular atheists and liberal theologians unconvincing. She wondered at the tone of superiority, pity, even contempt in some exegetical and theological commentaries. She'd not encountered it in other fields of historical research. Good biographers, while never *uncritical*, are always sympathetic towards their subjects, she thought; they find redeeming qualities even in villains. Without interest, empathy, appreciation, we cannot hope to understand and communicate the past. So why, Rice wondered, is there so little friendship with the past, with Jesus, in liberal Jesus scholarship? It's an interesting question.

I wonder if we theologians, exegetes, hierarchs and preachers sometimes risk being like Jesus' hometown crowd, over-familiar with his life and message, context and interpretations. Do we sometimes feel like them that we've got him all neatly sewn up? Prophets speak for mystery, for things we don't really know when we imagine we do, and that is not always welcome.

There's a second reason, perhaps, why Jesus was dismissed in his hometown. Quite simply: he wasn't saying what people wanted to hear anymore. It was all very well when he offered consoling, poetic words like the beatitudes—at least as long as you didn't attend to those words too closely. After all, they'd be the stuff of weddings and school Masses for centuries to come! But increasingly people found his message deeply confronting. Truth is the first thing that goes out the window when

a community wants to protect the established order. Just think of the communists rewriting history, repeatedly, to ensure that even the dead offered no resistance. Or look at the reporting of the ‘same-sex marriage’ issue at the moment, with one side presented as for liberty and equality and the other side as benighted bigots. Victoria’s Deputy Chief Psychiatrist, Kuruvilla George, dared challenge this ideology when he joined one hundred and fifty doctors in submitting to a Federal Inquiry the radical view that children do better with a Mum and a Dad, committed to each other and to the kid for the long haul. For this he was pilloried, driven out of his post on the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission and threatened with being drummed out of both university and medicine also. As a Dominican I recognize the ancient techniques of the Inquisition.

Tonight Ezekiel is sent to speak the Word of the Lord to Israel, ‘whether they listen or not’ (Ezek 2:2-5). So too is Christ. It’s not always a comfortable position to be in. Our lectionary says Jesus was ‘amazed’ by the reaction. εθαύμαζεν might be translated ‘He was in admiration’ or ‘awe’; but here it is something more like ‘He was stunned’—so stumped he couldn’t even work miracles. In this golden jubilee year we recall that the Second Vatican Council called the Church a prophetic people (LG 12, 31,35 etc.), speaking the Word of the Lord, guided by divine wisdom, persuading by beauty and love. But even that most optimistic Council recognized that this will sometimes meet stunning resistance from ‘the rulers of this world, the dark forces of iniquity’ (LG 35 after Eph 6:12). If a prophet is despised in his own country, so too may be a prophetic people.

Prophets speak for divine mystery; they speak also for divine judgment and that may also be unwelcome. If someone comes along and says: you work too hard; you neglect your loved ones or your spiritual life; you are too materialistic or ambitious; you are a liar or full of prejudices... she won’t be greeted with open



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arms. If a prophetic people says the economy is based on creating and feeding false needs; that endless consumption on credit is unsustainable; that little ones like the unborn, mentally ill, elderly and boat people are regularly violated or neglected—they may be as unwelcome as an asylum seeker in Canberra.

This was God’s great gamble: He could give us what we want, plenty of presents, a spectacle or two, occasional riddles from a mysterious stranger we can politely ignore. Or He could become one of us, from a village or suburb like ours, come speaking divine mystery and divine judgment, and ask us in due course to preach and challenge likewise. That makes Him—and in turn us—harder to misunderstand but easier to write off. It makes His message—and so ours—more challenging and more readily rejected. To come so close as to be our familiar, carpenter, clown, may allow Him more successfully to reveal God to us, but it also risks revealing us more fully to ourselves than we would like.

Make your exegetes and theologians, pastors and people, a prophetic people, O Lord. Give them wisdom to speak of your mystery and courage to speak of your judgment. Open their eyes to the inexhaustible mysteries of God, creation and the human person. Increase their delight in those mysteries, even as they become more familiar with them. Grant them ears to hear and hearts to judge and words to speak. Grant, too, that they might be heard—when their words are truly yours.