

9am Wesley – Canberra Central Parrish 13/11/2016 Kerry Jacobs A Tale of two Prophets

Hasn't it been a strange week: the election of Donald Trump and the death of a modern prophet – Leonard Cohen. Clearly things do not go as we expect.

While this was not the sermon I expected to give. I had got the wrong day and had prepared the reading from last week on the Sadducees question to Jesus. But David did such a great job with the sermon clearly I could not do that again. So, I thought that I would focus on Jonah but after the death of Leonard Cohen (and discussion with Phil who did the kids talk) I find now that I need to do a different sermon to what I had planned – a tale of two prophets and two men.

My first prophet and focus was Jonah – who tried to run away from God and journeyed from being a false to being a true prophet. Today's reading was Luke 21 on the destruction of the temple and on Jesus prophecy. Clearly, he was a true prophet – but what does that mean? And that leads us to two men – both move into the prophetic space – Donald Trump with doom, despair and a politics of fear. On the other hand, we have Leonard Cohen – who wrote the lines

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Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

Jonah is perhaps the most reluctant prophet in the entire bible and he was not a very good prophet was he! However, we tend to focus on the whale bit but that was just the beginning and was not the important part of the book of Jonah. But first – what was Nineveh. Nineveh is just west of Mosul and has just been liberated from Islamic state. This area was trouble even in bible times! It was the capital and heart of the Assyrian empire. It was large, powerful and inventive – and we can thank them for door locks, the flush toilet and a postal system. However, they were not nice people but were murderous invaders – and within 100 years the rulers of Nineveh besieged Jerusalem and took the Northern kingdom of Israel into captivity. Let's be frank – racial discrimination and intolerance had nothing on this – Jonah hated these people with a passion and was certain that God could not love them! Must be a mistake – wrong message – urgent business in Tarshish – must be God's will for me they make great metalwork there ...

Clearly Jonah was not very bright – not the sharpest knife in the box, when the sailors were trying to find someone to blame he owned up and said that his God made the heaven, the sea and the dry land – then it seems stupid to think that running to Tarshish would confuse God – maybe he was looking the other way and wouldn't notice! However, Jonah was out of luck and it was overboard and whale lunch for him. This teaches us that we are never actually in control when we do international travel. However, his Whale kept to regular flight schedules and soon he was vomited up on Nineveh beach.

So, Jo set about getting his own back and preached a rip-roaring sermon of doom and judgement. You are evil, God will punish you, the end is nigh. Unfortunately, well at least unfortunately from Jo's perspective because he was looking forward to those awful Ninevians getting what they deserved, well unfortunately they took the message seriously, repented and called on God for mercy. How unfortunate! Jonah did a classic dummy spit – life is not fair, I should have stayed home in bed (like he had much option!), life is not fair, I want to die. So, he went into the desert to die and had trouble with his landscape gardening and air conditioning.

Surprisingly God bothered to talk to him – and rather than the tribal deity of doom and judgement – God was much more interested in compassion for the innocence and hope for repentance.

The book of Jonah is exceptional because it is from that book the notion of repentance or teshuva (t'shuvan) comes into Judaism – the striking revelation that God is not just a God of rules and law but of repentance and forgiveness, and therefore Jonah is the basis of forgiveness in Christianity. It is also here Jonah learnt the calling of the true prophet – to preach repentance not judgement, hope not fear.

Many people find Leonard Cohen's songs depressing. But this is because he deals with what he described as 'the painful truth – not for the ears of youth' - issues of death, loss of love, depression and betrayal. However, in the hands of Leonard Cohen we see the beauty in the pain and find the presence of God in our suffering. This is what he means when he says – there is a crack in everything – that is how the light gets in.

Luke 21 5-19 looks like all doom and gloom. In a real way, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was the end of their world – it was the end of their Jewish faith as they knew and understood it – the end of God's presence on earth and the end of the Jews as the chosen people. It was the end of the world. In a similar way, we face what feels to us like the end of the world – the election of Donald Trump, a diagnosis of cancer and the death of those we love. Each of these things have the potential to shatter our world.

So, the disciples wanted to know when this was happening – they wanted certainty, they wanted control, they wanted a timeline and a five-step strategic plan. But Jesus refused to give them the timeline (or the strategic plan). As a true prophet – the when is not the important issue and the promise is not control and certainty. The false prophet comes with fear and certainty – pretending to know I am he – the time is near. And throughout the history of the church we have been deceived over and over again by those who preach the end of the world. These are the false prophets who are not from God.

Instead Jesus tells them not to obsess with dates, no to be frightened or worried and not to be deceived. Instead they could be quite certain that they would suffer – but we are all in the hands of God. This crack in everything opens us to God and to others.

So, what does this mean for us?

It is always easy to be afraid and hopeless and there are false prophets and deceivers who will stoke our fears and offer their false certainty and solutions. True prophets offer forgiveness, hope and light into our lives while speaking the truth. As such Jesus was the light, calls us to step into the light and be light for others. We can do this by embracing not rejecting the brokenness of the world, praying for and taking opportunities to be light in relationship with others. And if fear overwhelms us (as it does to us all from time to time) remember

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