

CHAPTER 2010 : SPIRITUALITY (3)

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Prophecy and Mission

“As for you little child, you shall be called a prophet of God the most high. You shall go ahead of the Lord to prepare his ways before him, to make known to his people their salvation through forgiveness of all their sins. ”

This text as you know comes from the ‘Benedictus’ found at the very end of the first chapter of St Luke. I would like to think that this verse says something to all of us as missionaries, and at the same time makes us realise that being prophets is part and parcel of our missionary calling. Indeed it is an integral dimension of all that is missionary. That being the case: *“the most important thing for us today is not survival but prophecy.”* This is interesting because for many religious orders our focus often seems to be on survival and therefore we are capable of putting in lots of time, effort and resources into all that concerns vocation animation and formation. Yet over the years, thank goodness, many resources are spent in the whole idea of Prophecy (Justice and Peace issues). Having said that we might ask just how do we see our role in society? How are we to be present to this world of ours and how do we see our future? We must be able to face the future with verve and vitality is our only legitimate orientation. I believe that future has to do with the prophetic dimension of our calling. It has to do with religious life making a difference – religious life meaning being there for the weak and poor of this world.

Looking at missionary life means looking at the mission entrusted to Jesus by the Father. If then we are to be serious at all about what we do and say as a Society we must exist for the people whom Jesus existed for; the downtrodden, the enslaved, those living on the very fringes of Society, the outcasts, the sinners, those caught up in the spiral of violence and hatred, those millions condemned to dwell in the hovels that make up the majority of those living in the vast slums that surround so many of our cities in Africa. Of course we are to be there and reach out also to the rich and the powerful of this world but we must help them look at the plight of the vast majority of their brother and sisters. And if we are forming for mission; if we are seeking vocations for mission we need to form not so much for mere intellectual capacity or pious perfectionism we must form for resolute single mindedness concerning the prophetic mission that is ours and we must train prophetic missionaries that are not caught up in the comfort of some individualistic cocoon but care intensely about others, that are not looking for their own status or privilege but are wildly concerned about the non status and non privilege of so many to whom they minister to. Our formation must empower our young men to be men who are not afraid of risk especially when it involves confrontation with the powers of this world that would keep the poor poor; that

would keep the marginalised always on the periphery; that would make the misery of the voiceless even more unbearable and degrading. Such formation then has to be prophetic, our structures should be prophetic, our way of life, our way of being should be prophetic but that will never happen if we insulate ourselves from the very life of others

This whole idea of confrontation with corrupt and oppressive systems is not new; it was there in the life of all the prophets. Indeed it would seem that the aim of many Old Testament prophets was to disturb the status quo, to rescue a religion that had become rigid and obsessed with outer observance and forgetting the plight of the suffering and of the poor. The prophets were able to point to a different view of reality, to a religion that was there at the cutting edge of humanity; to a religion that was not afraid of living on the margins. If we were to take, for example, a look at the gospel of Mark; the author of that gospel makes his listeners realise that Christ stood in the radical prophetic tradition of Jewish prophecy and he drives home the point after each radical act by reminding us that 'they wanted to kill him'. What we see here in the gospel of Mark is that indeed Jesus comes across as a subversive religious leader. He will blatantly ignore the dividing line between the pure and the impure. He will find the impure in the world that we think is the pure and he will find the pure in the world that we think is the impure world. Sacred space for Jesus is not necessarily the Synagogue, or the temple, rather it is the market place, the mountain side, the lake side – the hustle and bustle of everyday life where people live and breathe and struggle to survive. Jesus is a most unlikely founder of religion and if we take him seriously our world would be turned upside down.

Just like his cousin John, Jesus was a nomadic prophet, who displayed no discernable respect for religious hierarchy; his ritual acts centred not around the temple or synagogue, not around the priestly altar of sacrifice – but rather for him sacred space had become people's homes or wherever people go about their daily lives. Once again we need to go back to the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament. The prophet was the first social critic on the world stage and when we look back at the lives of such prophets we realise that they were in so many ways subversive – why? Because they dared point the finger at the status quo, they dared make people feel uneasy and they took risks that would move them out of the safety of their own comfort zones. They knew that their preaching and their way of being would indeed bring them into open confrontation with their own society and its leaders, and they were aware of just what price they would have to pay.

Jesus was very much rooted in such a tradition and if we were to study closely a gospel like Mark we might be surprised that for most of his early ministry Jesus was involved in a searing critique of the prevailing social order of the day- a social order that sought to keep women as objects, that sought to keep the sick marginalised and stigmatised, a prevailing social order that sought to keep children out of the way – quite

simply Jesus sought to free such people from the segregation imposed upon them because they were considered unclean, or were deemed to have no voice of their own. By healing people, he restored them back to community while at the same time castigating practices of social marginalization. The call of Jesus, his ministry and his mission, was not about personal enrichment, privilege or comfort. Indeed his ministry and mission had more to do with sacrifice of personal privilege and comfort. It had to do with suffering and rejection. And he called his disciples to the same. This was the prophetic nature of his mission and ministry.

We as Jesus' followers must recognize that the reign of God and our following in the footsteps of Christ, in other words, our discipleship seeks to live out that reign and stands as a radical alternative to the world's injustice, violence, and oppression.

When we look back at such a tradition of prophecy, which has continued throughout our Christian centuries, we realise that our religion has been marked more by prophets than anything else – Look at the list – St Francis, St Vincent de Paul, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and many more vibrant disciples. More than anything such men and women were marked by their ability to contest the reality of their time- they were there caught up in the contemporary events of their people, crisis, war, oppression, corruption, injustices of all kinds – and they shared such suffering with their people. And yet they were able to bring to such events a new way of seeing things because of the faith that burned in their hearts.

Maybe they were prophets more than anything else because they were able to read the signs of the times; they were not stuck in the rut of history and tradition. They were able to abandon what could have been a more comfortable and rewarding apostolate for a more pressing and vital one; they were able to listen and react to the most pressing problems of their time, they had their finger on the pulse of Society and knew just where they had to go. In the words of Albert Nolan the Dominican: *such men and women were able to feel with God; they were able to see the events of the time as God saw them and feel the same about such events as God did. They, therefore, shared God's anger, God's compassion, God's sorrow, God's disappointment, God's revulsion, God's sensitivity for the people, God's seriousness.... they were able to see the world through God's eyes... the prophets thought God's thoughts because they shared God's feelings and values. This is what it is meant to be filled with the spirit of God and this is what enables them to read the signs of the times with honesty and truth. (Albert Nolan Biblical Spirituality South Africa 1982)*

When there is a fire burning inside we are able to enter those places and situations that so many others fear. When we know just how we are held in the Father's embrace we can resolutely take a road that we know will not be easy and we can carry the burden of others that for so long have been so heavy to bear. If we have prophets within our own society they will always be a blessing in disguise for they might just nudge us out of the tiny and serene world of our ways of doing. So often our mission has become

domesticated with its time honoured ways of doing – the same too goes of our theology and spirituality. Maybe there should be much more place for risk, for the unknown rather than the known and tested ways that are so dear to our heart.

Risk is the essence of mission and indeed of the spiritual life – we need only look at Abraham, the prophets and of course our own history. Risk will energise, it will give life and it will take us to places where we never thought we would go; it will open vistas and horizons that we never thought possible. Yet if we look at the gospel, and once again, I think of the gospel of Mark, risk often means we will be counter-cultural and even subversive. *We must form for risk, not for social approval, not for community conformity.* Risk means that we will not crave respectability, we will not desire merely to conform to religious standards of the day – risk will be very much part of the prophetic dimension of our mission, it will be at the core of what discipleship is all about. A prophet never has all the answers, yet somehow to the great questions of the day he or she gives alternative responses. Today, especially in Africa, we need alternative ways of doing; we need an alternative response to tribalism, corruption, hatred, violence, to the thirst for power, to wealth, to clericalism. Yet for that to happen we must recognise the sacred space in the market place, at the margins of society, at the fault lines of society and there wherever people struggle to find meaning in their lives and whose hope for the future seems almost an unimaginable dream. Pedro Arrupe, the former Jesuit Superior General once said that we Christians hesitate too much for too long. Our plans are often too long term and we so often prefer to play it safe. Yes according to him we stick all too readily to what is guaranteed and tested, and our courage deserts us all too quickly when we face open ended risk taking ventures. Maybe, as a theologian (*Johannes B. Metz*) so rightly said some thirty years ago: *religious orders have moved too far into the middle ground where everything is nicely balanced and moderate;* and he continues: *where today do the religious orders exert a shock effect with the Church? Where are they passionately concerned to make prophetic criticism within the Church something that counts.....is the Church to develop without any prophetic exaggeration, without any religious radicalism?Who arouses our Church from that frozen sleep of the spirit with which it tries to resist the demands of our age without wanting to pass through them?*

Yet for us to take prophecy seriously we must like Jesus single-mindedly and resolutely seek the kingdom and its values – we cannot just go with the flow, we cannot just go along with the way things have always been or we might be reduced to mere irrelevance. The demands of discipleship and prophecy will always be tough – no personal agendas, no hidden agendas, no to personal advancement, no to a cynical and selfish living of religious life, but yes to a more community centred way of living, yes to be being energised by mutual moral support and prayer. And we must always remember the mission that has been entrusted to us is not ours, it is His; the words we dare speak are not to be ours but His. With that in mind our presence in the world, our missionary presence will in some way be a disturbing presence; there will be elements that will challenge and provoke the reactions of many because of the way we witness. Without such elements our spirituality will be over pious and sweet and we will run the risk of

being superficial in a world that is tired of superficiality. *'We would indeed be false prophets if we gave our contemporaries Jesus' comforting words of peace without the disturbing words about truth and justice.'*

Prophecy will never be part of our mission if it is not rooted in a deep life of prayer. Again look at the gospels and see how everything that Jesus did was rooted in a very personal contact with the Father. In the life of Jesus we see the balance between action and contemplation, between ministry and being alone with the Alone – without that contact we will never really be ministering in the name of Jesus but in our own, without that contact we will never really be speaking the words of Jesus but our own – and when that happens our ministry will lose something of its vitality and its biting edge. We will always need to draw strength from the deep well of our personal prayer life and daily contact with the one who entrusts us with the very same mission that he had been entrusted with. In his book 'Jesus Today' Albert Nolan says: *Jesus spoke, as most prophets do, for or on behalf of God. In fact he seems to have done so more confidently and boldly than any other prophet; he does not preface his message with words like: The Lord God says. He simply announces his message with: But I say to you. Where did Jesus derive this unshakeable assurance that he could speak so directly for God? (Mt 13:54). It is this mystical experience of union with God that enables them to speak on God's behalf.*

Albert Nolan states in fact that there are, in a way, two histories of the Christian Church. On the one hand the history of institutional Church with its popes, power struggles – bureaucracy – its desire to impose its will. On the other hand a parallel history of the martyrs, prophets, saints and mystics and their great concern and love for the world – for all. Thus there were two traditions: The tradition of Institutional Authority and the mystic-prophetic tradition. Surely as missionaries it is clear to what tradition we must belong to and to what tradition our missionary spirituality belongs to.

I would like to end this short expose with a quote from a lay person who expresses what he expects from the Church today and then a prayer from an unusual source.

What do we want the Church to do? We don't ask for more cathedrals. We don't ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for its presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We ask the Church to sacrifice and struggle with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother and sister. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don't ask for paternalism. We ask for servant hood. (Cesar Chavez)

And finally I end with a prayer written many centuries ago (*Sir Francis Drake*).

Disturb us Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity, and in our efforts to build a new earth we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas, where storms will show your mastery; when losing sight of land we shall find the stars.

We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes and to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope and love.

‘Survival, Prophecy, Hope’ by Anthony Gittins CSSp (article in Religious Life Review volume 48 no 258 september /October 2009)

‘Fire in these ashes’ Joan Chittister

‘Followers of Christ.’ Johannes B. Metz

‘Letting Go In Love.’ John Dalrymple

‘Jesus Today’ Albert Nolan