

**Third Sunday after Trinity 2017**

**Jeremiah 28: 5 – 9; Matthew 10: 40 – end**

A medieval astrologer prophesied to a king that his favourite mistress would soon die. Sure enough, the woman died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the woman's death. Word spread through the kingdom and soon got back to the astrologer. The King summoned the astrologer and commanded him: "Prophecy, tell me when you will die!" The astrologer realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately, no matter what answer he gave. But then, he thought of the most brilliant answer that would not only insure his immediate future, but would keep him safe and prosperous for years to come. "I do not know when I will die," he answered finally. "I only know that whenever I die, the king will die three days later."

Now it seems to me that that's a pretty objectionable joke on at least two grounds. The first is that the punch-line is barely approaching funny; but the second, rather more fundamental objection, is that it's theologically unsound.

And it's theologically unsound because it confuses prophecy with fortune telling. Prophecy is nothing to do with predicting what's going to happen in the future. Prophecy is about speaking God's word: it's about revealing the truth. Often, in Old Testament times that meant denouncing the iniquity of what rulers were doing. It meant pointing out that the way they were carrying on – denying people a just wage, exploiting the vulnerable or whatever – was inconsistent with God's ways. And prophecy often, therefore, included pointing out what the consequences of flouting God's ways were: the truth is that if you go on this way you are on a hiding to nothing; disaster will come, whether that's in the form of military oppression, famine or something else.

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And it's for that reason that prophesy becomes associated with saying what is going to happen: there's going to be famine, there's going to be pestilence, there's going to be war, everybody's going to be carted off into captivity. But that's incidental, it's ancillary to the main point the prophet is making. Prophets say "This is the word of the Lord." And the word of the Lord was perhaps best summarised by the prophet Micah: love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with the Lord your God.

That's how you discern whether what is being said is true prophecy: is it consistent with those values? You'll know there's really been prophecy when you see peace flourishing.

But of course, that is dependent upon the prophet having been heeded. Our most important task, as a community of faith, is a matter of discernment: it's a matter of identifying, naming and responding to God's activity. Within our community different people will

have different tasks. St. Paul speaks about the body having many parts. One limb is a leg, another is an arm; they each have their individual function; but they each contribute to the body functioning as a body. Each of us has a different role to play and by exercising that role we are collectively made into the body of Christ. But as well as having separate roles which we each must play, we have a corporate role which we must fulfil together. And that is about discernment.

Each of us has a calling. But our calling doesn't exist in isolation. It only exists within the context of us being part of one another. So, when people offer themselves to be selected for one of the church's accredited ministries, one of the most important questions is whether their sense of vocation is recognised, whether it's affirmed by others. There may be a check-list of skill sets required to fulfil the function of a given ministry; and it may be that a particular candidate can tick off what's on that list; but if that's not recognised, if it doesn't ring true within

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the community of faith, then it can't amount to a vocation that can serve that community. And every one of us has a responsibility to be contributing to that process of validating what God is doing in others' lives.

Very few of us are called to be prophets, to exercise the prophetic ministry of being able to speak with God's authority and to say what is consistent with God's ways and what isn't. But those rare individuals who do have that gift and that calling can only be released into the ministry of exercising that gift and calling if it is embraced by the rest of us. So the role of every one of us to embrace and encourage others is crucial.

And this is what this morning's New Testament lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel makes clear: whoever welcomes a prophet . . . will receive a prophet's reward. Being the one who welcomes a prophet is just as important as being the prophet themselves. The little things are just as important as the big things; and, conversely, the big, high profile roles are no more

important than most menial. The way the reading puts it is "whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

So who do you feel has a real gift that is not currently being recognised? It's your call to encourage it.

Amen.