

# Drawing from the prophets

Amos 5:21-24

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

**“There is a disturbing quality about the urgency of Jesus’ call, a shaking of the foundations which those who want a quiet life are bound to resent and resist.”<sup>1</sup>**

The biblical prophets are excellent examples of people disturbed by God, who then became a disturbance themselves to call people back to the ways of God. Whenever religious practice drifted away from social concern it was the prophets who rose up. A true prophet responds to and serves God’s interests ahead of their own. Those disturbed by a call to righteousness inevitably find their lives reoriented in a continuous process of displacement as they try to remain faithful to the inspiration of God’s spirit.

Amos, a herdsman living in about 750 BCE is the first in an extraordinary line of biblical prophets whose oracles have been left to us in written form. The book of Amos reflects the civil atrocities of the time: brutalities of war, captivity, desolation and political collapse. Amos called the people to remember their sacred history calling them back to their covenant with God, condemning religious worship that ignored the needs of the poor. Like Amos shortly before him, Hosea denounced the injustice and violence of his time, insisting that God demanded justice for the poor and oppressed: “*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings (Hos 6:6)*”. A little less gloomy than Amos, Hosea balanced his words of judgement with the promise of restoration and renewal.

Closer to 700 BCE, Isaiah was a prophet from whom not only do we draw directly but who also inspired writings from disciples and interpreters, compiled in his name. Unlike Amos and Hosea, Isaiah was an urban prophet concerned more with the coming of the Messiah. For Isaiah, God has particular concern for the marginalised: “*cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isa 1:16-17)*.” Around much the same time, Micah lived

as a rural prophet speaking for the poor farmers suffering at the hands of powerful landlords: “*What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)*”. These great prophets teach us that we must do more than merely decry what we do not like – we must also teach ‘the why’ of the unjust situation and describe the world that could and should be.

The spiritual legacy of the prophets embodies the commitment of Jesus and all those who came before to call for the Will of God for everyone. Prophetic spirituality is a call to live our faith on the streets of the world, an active spirituality that demands commitment as well as concern. It is a call to not only be faithful to the liturgical dimensions of our traditions but committed to a spirituality that cries out against injustice. It is easy to ignore the notion that we have a role to play – we can be lulled into thinking our spiritual task is to be ‘obedient’ but often fail to ask obedient to what and to whom? Our task fundamentally is to be obedient to the Will of God – this is the difference between personal spirituality that leads to private sanctification and prophetic spirituality. Christianity calls us to being a prophetic presence so that our world becomes a better place for us being there.

1 James D. G. Dunn in Antony J. Gittins, *The Way of Discipleship: Women, Men, and Today's Call to Mission*, p.61



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## Characteristics of modern day prophecy

(Joan Chittister, 'The Time is Now')

A prophet...

- says no to everything that is not of God
- says yes to embracing life, the pursuit of wholeness, acceptance of others, co-creation
- supports tradition but is wary of traditionalism
- reminds us that faith in a living God has often been smothered and even abandoned by institutional trappings
- refuses to promote a faith that concentrates on a few select sins while allowing social injustice to suffocate and silence everything else
- constantly risks being shunned socially, even ridiculed and ignored, while remaining committed to the Word of God ahead of social approval
- neither avoids the truth nor embellishes it, believing the truth is in itself enough to commit us all to something better
- speaks for reform of institutions which exist to preserve themselves
- acts in service to others – there is nothing prophetic about becoming what we are railing against
- is loud, clear and non-violent – prophecy is not a call to anarchy but rather a call to be the best of what we say we are
- engages with the community knowing that prophecy comes through dialogue and education, not force

**“The prophet will persist for as long as it takes to make the present what God intends it to be as well as to prepare the future to maintain it.”**

- Joan Chittister OSB

*“One must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us... those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone. The harvest comes about only because it dies, allowing itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest... This is the hope that inspires us Christians. We know that every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us... Let us all do what we can.”*

(From the final homily of St Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador).

**Loving God, Spirit of Life,**

**We pray for the courage to speak truth to power.**

**We pray for wisdom to know how.**

**We pray for discernment.**

**Help us to denounce sin, but love the sinner.**

**Help us to announce by our lives and actions  
the power of your promise of life.**

**Amen.**