**Morning Praise @ Home 8 December 2024**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading Luke 3:1 – 6

### Reflection from Philip

In our reading from Luke 3, we heard about the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist, a prophet who received ‘The word of God’ to go and preach a baptism of repentance – preparing the way for Jesus, whom he would subsequently baptise in the Jordan River.

Now, John (Coyne, that is, not The Baptist) is going to focus on the ministry of John the Baptist next week, so today, I want to take a wider look at the prophets we read about in the Bible – prophets like Isaiah, mentioned in our reading. What is the nature of prophecy? How is it relevant to us today?

John the Baptist had heard a message from God that he should go out into the wilderness around Jordan. I’ve been there – it really is a desert, a tough place for any mission posting! But he was sure he had heard the word of the Lord, and he just got on with it. It wasn’t always that straightforward for the other biblical prophets. Many of them were very uncertain about giving the message they had heard from God – how would people react to the message? Would they be believed? Sometimes they didn’t even agree with what they had been told to do or say – Jonah, for example, was very uncertain and at times downright disobedient to God!

But I’m getting ahead of myself. What then is a prophet? There is a common misunderstanding that prophets mostly foretold the future. On some occasions, that was right, but in biblical times, people understood that a prophet was a mouthpiece for God, receiving a message from Him and proclaiming, or telling it, according to his instructions. The difficulty was that there were a number of people who claimed to be prophets, so how were you to know who was passing on a message from God?

A prophet had to have a close relationship to God. Elisha, for example, is described in the Bible 36 times as ‘the man of God’.

Moses had a regular dialogue with God and had a unique sight of God. He was close to God. But he still doubted his own ability to speak to an Egyptian pharaoh and to demand he set the Israelites free. He was so reluctant, so nervous, that God had to appoint his brother Aaron to be his spokesman.

A prophet is one who passes on a message from God.

Remember Jonah? He didn’t want to go to Nineveh to pass on God’s message. He thought the people of Nineveh were wicked and didn’t deserve to be saved. He was scared of how they would react to him. So he went on a ship in the opposite direction. He ended up being thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale and then spat out again. That’s when he realised he needed to do what God had told him to do! He was close to God, but he was very human – he had the same worries and fears as the rest of us.

Prophets sometimes spoke to the people but often they were told by God to speak direct to Authority. No wonder Moses was scared of having to tell Pharaoh to release all his Jewish slaves!

There is no prophet school. And unlike Kings, you cannot inherit the role of being a prophet. The New Testament identifies prophets as one of the spiritual gifts given to the Church, alongside evangelists and pastors (Eph 4:11). Now a church can elect someone to be an evangelist or pastor, but it can’t appoint someone a prophet – that person needs to hear a message from God with instructions to pass it on.

Sometimes a man was chosen by God to pass on a single message, while others were used by God many times in their lives. The authority to speak as a prophet can only come from God.

The likes of Moses and Samuel and David were great leaders, but also prophets. Some leading priests, such as Samuel and Ezekiel, were also prophets. Being a prophet is a function rather than an appointed office.

Some prophets faced great hostility and adversity. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were called to declare God’s message to hostile listeners. They all received ‘a call’ from God that they couldn’t avoid or ignore. They weren’t just wise men with strong opinions. They had received a message from God and proclaimed it.

How did the prophets hear their message from God? For some prophets, they heard an external voice from God – Samuel thought Eli had called to him, when it was really God. This suggests an audible voice.

For others, a prophet received a sudden direct message from God. In 1 Kings 13, a prophet standing by the altar suddenly cries out to his companion ‘Thus says the Lord’ and then rebukes his companion – but there is no indication others heard any voice.

Sometimes prophets received their message through visions; sometimes through a sudden realisation,

a clarity of vision, lacking in those around them.

So what of those Old Testament prophecies about Jesus? In the New Testament, there are numerous references to Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus. We are told by the Gospel authors to listen to the witness of the prophets.

Jesus wasn’t just a religious teacher – he didn’t just ‘appear’ and decide to be The Messiah. There were hundreds of Old Testament prophecies which were made about Him - who He would be and what He would do when he came.

Isaiah, in particular, made many prophecies about Jesus (and indeed, in our passage, he prophesies about John the Baptist).

The prophecies made in the Old Testament were for all of us, for all of the people when they were made - and for all of us now. When we put our faith in Christ we are relying on one who has proven himself to be the Son of God, who was described by the prophets hundreds of years before his birth.

The true prophets were selfless. They didn’t necessarily know who their prophecies were about, they were just inspired by God and his Spirit. God’s message came through them. God had effectively told them the message was not for them, but for others – and for us today. God said to them this is not for you, it is for people who will come long after you. True prophets cared not for themselves, but for others – it wasn’t all about them.

Are there prophets among us today? Views on this vary from denomination to denomination. Today we have the benefit of the scriptures to guide us, but there are still occasions when people feel led by God to speak his word to others. I believe God does use people to pass on a message from Him to others who need to hear it. They may be being used as God’s mouthpiece. The message may be a prophecy, but I would hesitate to label those people as ‘prophets’ in the biblical sense.

Sometimes we need to be willing to do or say something that isn’t all about us. God has bigger plans than those we focus on as part of his Kingdom. Sometimes we may need to endure some hardship, sometimes we need to speak truth to people and authority. We can’t always see God’s plans. He is doing things that fit into a bigger plan than we can ever see. Like those Old Testament prophets, we have to accept that what God is doing is going to minister to many more people, who are coming after us. It’s not all about us!

So do we listen to the message of the prophets? Can we imitate their selflessness, their following of the commands of God to give their message?

Do we believe the message of one who came to preach baptism and repenting of sin?

Do we repent and turn away from sin as the prophet John proclaimed in the wilderness?

Do we make Christ our Lord and Saviour? This good news, this Gospel, was given for us. Like any message, it has to be received; like any gift that you will receive this Christmas, it has to be opened; we have to accept it, take it, and open it. It’s up to us to personally respond to the message of the prophets. **Amen**

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**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, in this Advent season we pray for your church throughout the world.

At this time we especially pray for Justin Welby and also for all Bishops and other leaders whose words will be broadcast on television, radio and by newspapers. Give them wisdom and guidance.

We pray for all the nations of the world and their leaders. We pray that in all the uneven, rough and unjust places of the world the way may be prepared for you to bring equality, healing and justice to all your people.

We pray particularly today for the people of the Holy Land where Jesus came to live alongside us. Bring a new spirit of reconciliation among those who have brought division, suspicion and danger into the streets of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

We pray for homeless people and for refugees who have no country to call their own. Let your blessing be with those who work to help the homeless this Christmas, and give to all of us the determination to help where we can.

We pray for all who watch and wait while we sleep: for police, hospital workers, and ambulance workers, for fire fighters and for all who work in the dark hours of the night.

We pray for all who suffer at this time of year, from loneliness, from cold, from rejection by others. Lord, we bring before you all those who society rejects, because of illness – physical or mental, those who have different beliefs, different colour of skin, or those who simply choose to be different. You sent your Son to bring joy and comfort to all men, we pray that we may help fulfil His mission at this time of the year.

We pray for all children and especially this week for the youngest pupils of Bishop Wilson School as they present a Nativity Play in church. Be with them and their teachers as they bring the Christmas Story to us.

We pray for all those in particular need who are weak and vulnerable. Christmas can be a difficult time of year for many people, separated from their loved ones because of work, because they are ill in hospital, or because they are unable to join in festivities for whatever reason. We pray that they will be touched by your gentle tenderness bringing them comfort and strength.

In our own hearts, in a moment of quiet, we bring to you our concerns for the needs of those we know and love. Let your loving and gentle kindness surround them all.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**