

**DIOCESE OF
CHICHESTER**
TO KNOW · LOVE · FOLLOW JESUS



YEAR OF THE BIBLE 2017

Hear the Word of the Lord

A Lent course for the Diocese of Chichester's
Year of the Bible

Session 3 – The Prophets

written by James Dunn and Alice Whalley
and edited by Rebecca Swyer

Session introduction (5 minutes)

This will be the third time your group has met together so a recap of who's who might be worthwhile.

Suggested opening prayers (10 minutes)

Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). One way of splitting a group is by birth month – Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec. Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, accompanied or not, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

O Lord, open thou our lips.

And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

O God, make speed to save us.

O Lord, make haste to help us.

Psalm 36 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

Sin whispers to the wicked, in the depths of their heart;
there is no fear of God before their eyes.

They flatter themselves in their own eyes
that their abominable sin will not be found out.

The words of their mouth are unrighteous and full of deceit;
they have ceased to act wisely and to do good.

They think out mischief upon their beds and have set themselves in no good way;
nor do they abhor that which is evil.

Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens
and your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness stands like the strong mountains, your justice like the great deep;
you, Lord, shall save both man and beast.

How precious is your loving mercy, O God!
All mortal flesh shall take refuge under the shadow of your wings.

They shall be satisfied with the abundance of your house;
they shall drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the well of life
and in your light shall we see light.

O continue your loving-kindness to those who know you
and your righteousness to those who are true of heart.

Let not the foot of pride come against me,
nor the hand of the ungodly thrust me away.

There are they fallen, all who work wickedness.
They are cast down and shall not be able to stand.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

A prayer

**God our Father,
you lead us in love,
and guide us in your path.
As we make our Lenten journey,
help us to cast aside all our pride,
and listen not to the temptation of earthly power,**

**but to your call to love your kingdom.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Hymn/song suggestions: Bright the vision / Open our eyes, Lord

Professor Dunn's introduction (10 minutes)

Prophecy was a striking feature of Israel's religion, as the prominence given to them in the Hebrew Bible indicates. Aaron was a prophet for Moses (Exod. 7.1), and Moses' sister Miriam is called a 'prophet' (15.20), as later was Deborah (Judg. 4.4). Notable is Num. 11.26-29 and warnings against false prophecy (Deut. 13.1-5). Moses was regarded as the model prophet (18.15-18; 24.10). Prophecy proper (the 'former prophets') began with Samuel (1 Sam. 4-28), and most notably, Nathan (2 Sam. 7, 12; 1 Kgs 1), Elijah (1 Kgs 17-21; 2 Kgs 1-2) and Elisha (2 Kgs 2-8, 13).

The latter or writing prophets begin with **Amos** and **Hosea** who spoke in the northern kingdom (Israel) in the 8th century. Amos is the archetypal prophet, not a professional, just a herdsman, but called by God to prophesy (Amos 7.14-15), warning his people that God judges his people as he does other nations. Most notably, Hosea is instructed to marry a wife who is unfaithful to him, but Hosea seeks her out, redeems her and brings her back home – an image of unfaithful Israel.

They were followed by **Micah** and **Isaiah** who preached in Judah in the same century. Micah was the first to predict the downfall of Jerusalem because of dishonest business practices – his message classically summed up in Mic. 6.8. Our book of Isaiah is usually regarded as the work of two or three prophets, the first (Isa. 1-39) wrestling with the threat of judgment on Israel from Assyria and Babylon, but predicting a 'day of Yahweh' when Jerusalem will become the centre of his worldwide rule (notably Isa. 9.1-7 and 11.1-9).

More famous is Isaiah 40-55 (usually called Second Isaiah) – most notable for the 'servant songs' proclaiming/predicting the mission of the servant of the Lord (42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-6; 52.13-53.12), and probably written from exile in Babylon. Isaiah 56-66 (including 61.1ff.) is usually attributed to a third Isaiah.

Jeremiah can be dated to the 7th century (Jer. 1.2 – 627 BC). He is remembered as denouncing Judah because of its unfaithfulness and prophesying Jerusalem's destruction and exile. Note Jer. 7.11. **Ezekiel** is remembered as the prophet of the Babylonian exile. His prophecy is noted for its oracles of judgment on Israel (Ezek. 1-24) and other nations (25-32), before predicting the restoration of Israel (33-39) and the restoration of the temple (40-48). **Daniel** was also in Babylon. His prophecy has two parts: first, his interpretation of royal dreams and the trials suffered by the faithful Jews (Dan. 1-6); second, his several visions (7-12), notably of 'one like a son of man' (7).

The rest of the 'minor prophets' who conclude the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament have had varied impact on Christianity. **Joel**, date of origin unknown, has the famous prophecy of the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2.28-32) quoted in Acts 2.17-21. **Obadiah** (literally 'servant of Yahweh'), the shortest book in the Old Testament, is an oracle concerning the divine judgment on Edom and the restoration of Israel. Probably best known is **Jonah**, notable for his attempt to escape God's commission and for his anger when Ninevah responded to his message – referred to in Matt. 12.40.

Nahum, probably late 7th century, is notable for his prophecy of Ninevah's destruction. **Habakkuk**, again probably 7th century, contains Paul's famous text (Hab. 2.4c). **Zephaniah**, of indeterminate date, is principally prophecy of judgment on Israel and its enemies. **Haggai**, prophesying after the return from exile, is notable as urging the rebuilding of the temple. **Zechariah**, also late 6th century, was mainly concerned for the restoration of the temple. It provided key prophecies taken up in the New Testament, notably Matt. 21.5 and 26.31. **Malachi** consists of several independent prophecies, aimed to correct the lax religious and social behaviour of the Israelites (particularly the priests) in post-exilic Jerusalem. It predicted the ministry of John the Baptist (Mal. 3.1 = Matt. 11.10).

About the author of this reflection:

James D. G. "Jimmy" Dunn FBA was for many years the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. He has degrees and doctorates from Glasgow and Cambridge Universities.

Group discussion (15 minutes)

1. Who or what were the Prophets most critical of?
2. Which of the prophets was most influential for early Christianity and why?

Bible passage (5 minutes)

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob.

Indeed they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with foreigners.

Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots.

Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.

And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low – do not forgive them!

Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty.

The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled;

and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft.

The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

The idols shall utterly pass away.

Enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

Turn away from mortals, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they?

Isaiah 2:5-22

Alice Whalley's reflection (10 minutes)

One of the happiest days of my life was spent at the Kilnsey Agricultural Show in the Yorkshire Dales a couple of years ago. Most of the day was spent sitting on a straw bale watching the Sheepdog Trials. Shepherd after shepherd, with a constant stream of almost identical looking dogs, looked to herd a group of six sheep around a course and into a pen. It was mesmerising. The understanding between shepherd and dog was astonishing, with the dog responding immediately to every subtle command that was called their way. Every time the dog strayed off from where it was supposed to be, a call from the shepherd came, and with instant response, the dog was back to where it should be.

About the author of this reflection:

The Revd. Alice Whalley is a curate in Moulsecoomb, near Brighton

As well as being a lovely image, it's quite a helpful one to think about what it is the prophets are trying to do. Isaiah, especially in the first part of the book, responds to a lot of what he sees going on around him. Some of that is the stream of political crises that strike the kingdom of Judah, but a lot is Isaiah's response to what he sees as a breakdown of social morality. People aren't behaving towards each other in the way they should. Power is being misused, and those who have the power are abusing it. It's the most vulnerable that suffer as a result. It sounds a familiar picture. More importantly for Isaiah, the people are not responding to God well either. A lot of Isaiah's prophecy is not about predicting what might happen in the future. It's about pointing out where God's people aren't where they are supposed to be now. It's about pointing out where we are like the sheepdog, not quite on track, and where God as shepherd calls us back.

Unlike a sheepdog though, our response isn't usually unquestioning and immediate. When God calls us back to him, we usually think that we might have a better idea. The passage I've chosen from Isaiah gives an idea why. Our pride gets in the way. Being human, having free will, gives us a certain amount of power that we can use. Often, we use it in the wrong way, and direct to the wrong things. Isaiah talks about how the people use their power towards filling their coffers with silver and gold, and placed their trust not in God, but in idols and soothsayers and diviners. They were a people who had become proud, putting their trust in their own power rather than in the power of God. And by trusting in our own power, we start on a path in which that power can be abused. Our relationships can start to become skewed, and we forget that any power we have comes from God.

It's an idea that St Augustine of Hippo picks up on in the early 5th century. One of the themes of his great work 'The City of God' is about a forming of society in which the citizens act as if they were already belonging to God's kingdom. He picks up on the problem of pride, in which he says 'the soul perversely loves its own power, and despises a more righteous, higher power.' It's the beginning of a society's problems, when everyone concentrates on their own pride, the power that they have over others, rather than the power that God has over us all.

And so, we are reminded to be a bit more like the sheepdog, and respond to the call God makes to us to bring us back to where he wants us to be. A place where we let go of our own pride and our own power, and follow the path that God calls us to. It sounds like hard work, but fortunately we have a good example to follow. In Jesus, we see someone without his own pride, who never abused the power he had over others, and acted like the shepherd, calling his people back to the sheepfold.

Group discussion (20 minutes)

1. Where in your own life do you think you might have allowed your pride to get in the way?
2. How might your church act to call your community back God's vision for society?

Concluding prayer/worship (10 minutes)

Lord our God, you are our shepherd and we are your sheep,
come among us to lead us towards the vision of your kingdom.

We have rejoiced in our pride,
 and lived in our own power.
 Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy.

We have strayed from your path,
 and followed our own way.
 Christ have mercy.
Christ have mercy.

We have listened to our own voice,
 and have not answered your call.
 Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy.

**Almighty God,
 may you have mercy upon us,
 forgive us those times we have strayed from your path,
 strengthen and guide us by your word in the Scriptures,
 and send us your Spirit to form us ever more into the likeness of your Son,
 our Saviour Jesus Christ.**

Amen.

As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world. In preparing to do this, participants are encouraged to reflect in silence, and then (if they choose) offer their prayer aloud, each time ending with:

Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

The prayers of intercession may be concluded as follows:

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

A prayer (the collect for Bible Sunday)

**Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.**

Song / hymn suggestions: God is working His purpose out (selected verses) / Thank you for saving me

The grace

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

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