



“To comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable”

By Patrick Kirkwood

I worked in the ABC for many years in the Religious Department, now called Religion and Ethics. Some colleagues called us the “God Botherers”. We didn’t mind since it was a reverse kind of tribute and when they needed an insight into something beyond the news, they often talked to us. It was a kind of religious advice centre.

We produced many significant mainstream programs. When I became leader of the Department, I was the first Catholic, the first non-ordained and the first with long experience in media production. One of my first acts was to bring in a management facilitator with a religious background (he had to know about what we were trying to do). All the staff came from across Australia and we spent a week getting to know one another better and forming common goals as to what we should do.

Our objective in television was, within five years, to get a series into “prime time”, for example 7.30pm on a Sunday night. Most of our programs were on weeknights at 10.30pm. That might seem a long lead time but getting staff and budgets and people and scripts, we had to be realistic. We did it in three years! The first success series was called “Healers, Quacks or Mystics”. That was followed by “The Sunburnt Soul” an examination of the Australian spiritual psyche in many aspects of life.

Somewhere along the line I had cut out a saying and stuck it on my wall. It said, “To comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable”. This was a kind of mantra which I often recalled when sifting through program ideas. In the words of a media priest, who visited from Los Angeles, our task was “To speak the truth with Charity”.

The other task was to know your audience, its needs and desires, and I commissioned a friend, Hugh Mackay, to do a study of our potential audience. This consisted of trying out program ideas in focus groups and getting their reactions.

I thought of all this recently when thinking about the Prophets of the Old Testament. Why did the Jewish authorities who determined the “canon” of the Bible include these people? Surely they should be omitted or forgotten. They were often disturbers of the comfortable, and the comfortable included Kings, Princes, Priests and other religious authorities. But they were included in the Bible as reminders of the prophetic voice which often was introduced by, “The Lord said...” They were driven by the Spirit of God.

Jesus himself said ““Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” (Matt 5:17). He said this just after he had spoken the beatitudes, and just before he said those words above, he said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.” But he also knew how to comfort the disturbed.

I have long been an admirer of the prophetic voice, but we must always use discernment. Even in the Old Testament there are other prophets mentioned who were not included in the “canon”, perhaps because they got it wrong or their message was considered not to be authentic. We must pray for guidance.