

The word of the
Lord came to me
like a fire burning
in my heart

The Prophet Jeremiah

THE PROPHETS OF ADVENT

Each year during Advent, we are invited to listen to the Hebrew prophets in the First Reading. This year, on Sundays we hear from Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephania and Micah. On weekdays, the majority of the readings come from the prophet Isaiah. The theologian Fr Gerald O'Collins has called the writings of Isaiah 'the fifth gospel'. By this he means that so many of the themes of the gospels have their scriptural beginnings in Isaiah.

WHO WERE THE PROPHETS?

We have become familiar with the prophets capturing the yearning of the people for the promised Messiah with vivid descriptions of what that would mean. Many of their prophecies are included in the Gospels. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus reads from Isaiah to proclaim his mission:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news
to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to
the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to
let the oppressed go free.*

Luke 4:18

Hearing the prophets particularly during Advent and Christmas, it may seem that their role was only to be predictors of the coming of Christ.

In their own time, the prophets had a message that was a challenge to those in power, for their failure in justice, especially to the poor. Their messages remain especially relevant for us today.

Nahum Ward-Lev, a teacher, scholar and spiritual director describes the role of the prophets in *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets*:

Over two and half millenia ago, the Hebrew prophets arose in a time with similarities to the times we are now living. An increasing gap between the rich and the poor caused widespread suffering and political unrest. The major institutions were failing to protect people from powerful and privileged people. Political leaders seemed incapable of preventing impending disaster.

In the face of these crises, the Hebrew prophets lived the wisdom, courage and vision that is also

needed in these times.

At its heart, the prophetic witness was a way of listening, listening beyond the social norms of the day, listening to the word of the liberating God. The prophets urged the people to listen to God's word because the voices of the kings and wealthy landowners was too narrow, self-interested to include the concerns of the poor and suffering.

The prophetic tradition challenges us to listen especially to those who are oppressed and suffering, and to listen to the voice of God.

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was a priest and probably about seventeen, when he experienced God's call to proclaim a challenging message to the people. At first, Jeremiah resists the call with the excuse that he is too young. God insists that he chose Jeremiah even before he was born.

The meaning of the Hebrew word for prophet, is to call or to be called. The pattern of being called by God and resisting the call is a common pattern for the biblical prophets.

Jeremiah prophesied at a time of great political turmoil and social upheaval. Leaders and families of Jerusalem were forced into exile and slavery in Babylon, the temple had been destroyed and the city of Jerusalem had been ransacked.

Jeremiah longed for the time when he could proclaim the fulfilment of God's promise to the people. He describes this longing as a 'fire in his heart, imprisoned in his bones.'

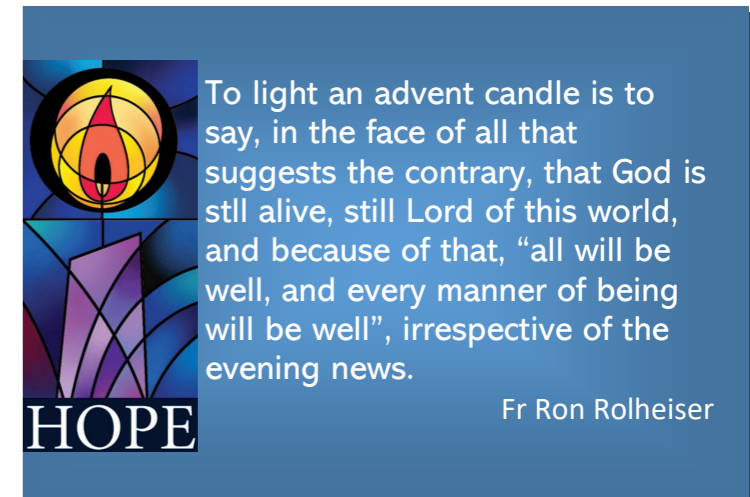
The brief passage from Jeremiah this Sunday speaks into the devastation to encourage a people who were devastated by war; a people who had lost everything - their city of Jerusalem, their temple, their king, their families and who were no longer sure of their identity or what the future held for them.

Imagine the deep longing in the hearts of people in the darkness of exile to be back in the land God had given them, with their relationship with God restored and renewed. Through Jeremiah, God promises a small sign of life growing out of a seemingly lifeless stump that would bring a person who would lead with integrity, who would bring about security, peace and justice.

PROPHETS TODAY

Who do you recognise as contemporary prophets? Whose voices do you hear wisely and courageously uncovering the causes of injustice in our society? The loss of mutual relationships of respect and inclusivity; lack of authentic community; disregard of human dignity, the common good and solidarity? Perhaps they are unexpected contemporary prophets.

**What are the deepest longings of your heart
this Advent?**



To light an advent candle is to say, in the face of all that suggests the contrary, that God is still alive, still Lord of this world, and because of that, "all will be well, and every manner of being will be well", irrespective of the evening news.

Fr Ron Rolheiser

BEGINNERS

But we have only begun to love the earth.

We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.

*How could we tire of hope?
.... so much is in bud.*

*How can desire fail?
... we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy.*

*only begun to envision
how it might be to live as siblings
with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.*

*We have only begun to know
the power that is in us
if we would join
our solitudes in the
communion of struggle.*

*So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture.*

Denise Levertov