

## Prophecy

In part six, we are discussing features of the relationship which Jesus has with his followers today. Although the promise of his presence is unconditional, we have suggested that believers can foster this relationship by means of prayer and feeding from Scripture. But even that is not the whole story.

When God fills someone with his Holy Spirit, as one pours water into a jug, he does not stop when the level reaches the brim. Instead, there is an overflow, so that others around are affected. Jesus explained this, announcing that whoever received living waters from him would find them flowing on into the lives of others (John 7:37-39).

This can happen in a number of ways. We will focus on prophecy. By this word we mean that God not only fills his followers with himself, but he also gives insights to them which are intended for other people. This was referred to by Peter on the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out; everyone affected would prophesy (Acts 2:18).

In this sense, the scriptures themselves are prophetic. We saw that the word of God in the Old Testament was not just for the benefit of the first readers, but affected later generations too. Similarly, the New Testament speaks not only to the first century, but also to us today. Jesus was himself a prophet. This is what they concluded when they heard his remark about living water (John 7:40). He spoke the word of God to people which he had himself received from God (Luke 5:1).

He read Simon the Pharisee's thoughts, as only a prophet could (Luke 7:39-40). He described himself as a prophet (Luke 13:33). He never contradicted those who described him as a prophet (eg. Luke 24:19).

It is our belief that although Scripture is complete, God has not stopped speaking; he communicates with his followers today. That is not to say that they always hear him. In one of the Narnia Chronicles, when the children were with Aslan in his mountain country, they heard his voice clearly, but they were warned that when they descended into Narnia, they would hear him less clearly and less often, and so it turned out (C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1953, p30). This describes a common experience when it comes to hearing from God; at times believers feel very close to God indeed, but at other times much less so. Even at our best moments, we only catch a glimpse; Paul said that we prophesy in part, only seeing a poor reflection in a mirror, as it were (1 Cor 13:9, 12).

The experience of God seeming closer at some times than at others is not unique to our day. Prophecy seems to have come and gone within the biblical era itself. In the time of Moses, there was much communication between God and Israel, but by the time of Eli, "the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions (1 Sam 3:1)." Later on, there were several centuries when the word of God came strongly to the prophets, but then revelation apparently ceased for about 400 years after Malachi, until the word of God came once again to John the Baptist in the desert (Luke 3:2).

It would be unhelpful to attempt to lay down what God does in this matter. As we have seen, some people want to limit God, saying that he does not speak today. This is to silence him. Others might want to say that God always speaks, and that to fail to hear him puts blame on the disciple. This is to insist that God always has his mouth open, when we have seen from Scripture that he appears to vary the amount he says. We should not attempt to treat God as if he were a ventriloquist's dummy, speaking or not at our beck and call. He is God, not us.

Paul encouraged his readers to pursue the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). We will take it therefore, that it is good to pursue this gift today. This suggests that God would rather speak to us than remain silent, and that he is pleased when we attempt to catch what he is saying. We may be hard of hearing (Heb 5:11, RSV). Further, some have this gift, another that, so while everyone can have a go at it, not everyone will major in prophecy (1 Cor 7:7, 12:29). There is no judgment on anyone in this matter. We will simply decide that part of Jesus being with his followers today is that the Christian body will pick up from Jesus the head what he is about, in one way or another, and pass it on.

In Scripture, God chose to speak in many and varied ways (Heb 1:1). He often spoke in riddles (Num 12:6-8). My own experience has been that he gives me strange pictures or thoughts in my mind. Although they can break in at any time, these almost always come when I am silent before him, generally in prayer.

Often plays on words are involved. This may be because I am rather fond of these; however, they are also a feature of Old Testament prophecy. To give an example, one might render Jeremiah 1:11-12 and following somewhat as follows, to capture the flavour of the original :- What do you see, Jeremiah?" "I see the branch of a Quince tree," I replied. The Lord said to me, "You have seen correctly, for it is quits for those that live in the land..."

The experience of God painting in my imagination began on a church weekend away, when I was feeling most frustrated. I went for a walk early one morning, in order to be on my own, and at one stage stopped in great agitation, and prayed, "Show me what you want me to do!". What I meant was, guide me in what steps to take in my career, but God chose to take my words at their face value. From then on, the pictures began to flow. I was being shown.

I believe that if I had said, "Tell me what to do", I might have received words instead. As it was, a friend of mine was suspicious of my 'gift' - he never received pictures, only words. I was jealous of him; how much nicer to receive words which were not ambiguous, than these pictures which I could often not understand. We both had to learn to accept each other, and recognise that God could do as he liked with us. It is a mistake to rule out what might or might not be the activity of God on the basis of our own prejudices.

I will now share a sequence of pictures I received. I do this, not because I think they are a message for the wider church, although they may be, nor even because I consider them particularly significant. Rather, they are an example of something which I believe came from God, although to this day I am not certain. My own attitude to any form of prophecy is that I am slow to act on it alone, and certainly not without further reflection, thought and prayer. My aim in sharing the pictures is that I hope the discussion will be instructive.

During the weekend I have mentioned, I found myself imagining the following, while seated quietly when the others were singing worship songs. I saw a large red eye with a black pupil. Then suddenly, it was clear that it belonged to a crocodile, since I saw its jaws snapping viciously at close range, looking from sideways on. I found that most frightening. Then I found myself looking from further away; this time, I could see that the crocodile was under water among a shoal of fish, swallowing them down in quantities. This seemed awful to me, and I felt dreadful.

Then the scene changed to a child's clockwork railway. There was a large loop of line in front of me, with a green semi-circular wooden tunnel covering the line at the right hand end. I had owned a railway set just like this when I was small. While I watched, the train came out two inches from the tunnel, but then the scene froze. It was a purple, 1890s train, with larger and smaller wheels. It came out of the tunnel just far enough for me to see that it was upside down - its wheels were up in the air, and its funnel down towards the track.

Then I saw the crocodile again, which gave me a sinking feeling, but this time I became aware that it was lying on its back. It was now apparently dead, since there was a taut rope coming out from inside its mouth. The rope then pulled the crocodile off out of sight to the right, but I did not see who was pulling the rope.

Several fears of mine were highlighted by these pictures, notably a childhood fear of crocodiles, and a concern that maybe I did not play with my own children enough. As a first step, I sought out a trusted friend to pray over these matters with me within the following week. Also during that week, we happened to visit a toy-shop in which there was a plastic crocodile about six inches long, and I noticed that its eye was precisely as I had seen in my imagination.

Two people had come to pray with me at the time I had the pictures. They said that I was to go home and reflect on the meaning of these pictures. This was good advice. I found several references in Scripture that seemed helpful. The crocodile in Job 41 is "king over all that are proud (v34)". Maybe the picture included a prediction that God would deal with my pride. I never became certain what the crocodile was about. I wondered whether the fish stood for believers, in view of the little

fish badges that have sprouted over recent years. Were believers being consumed by hostile forces too strong for them, perhaps? At least the closing picture suggested final victory over an impossible situation, which was encouraging, and also in line with the repeated teaching in the gospels that with God, all things are possible (Luke 1:37, Rev 17:14).

The railway was more suggestive at first. I came to understand that the outdated train emerging from the tunnel was in one sense myself, and in another sense the church. Both were coming out into the light of day, and both were now seen to have been upside down. I have found in the following years that a great deal of my thinking needed to be radically changed. It also seemed significant recently when in a prayer meeting, one of the members declared "This church is an upside-down Noah's Ark", and another member seemed to confirm this, in that he had just imagined a rotten old craft half buried in mud. The context was that we were praying into the possibility that God wanted us to open the church as a refuge for the homeless poor, as described in our chapter on good news to the poor (Isa 58:7). As we have seen from our study, much church thinking down the years might be described as having been upside down.

I also found it helpful to reflect on the similarity between the church in Britain, and steam railways. There are a number of societies that put a great deal of effort into running steam trains along a few miles of track. The results appeal to several thousands of people, as an occasional leisure activity. But as modes of transport, they are outdated, and no-one who wanted to travel by train on business, for example, would dream of choosing his route to include a steam train ride. Instead he would take the fast train on the main line.

Likewise, it seemed to me, the church has tended to become a society dedicated to preserving something from the past, in many people's eyes. It appeals to enthusiasts. It is all very well if you like that kind of thing, and indeed makes quite a good tourist event at Christmas or at a wedding or baptism, but many people would not dream of seeing the kind of churches I had been involved in as a serious means of getting to somewhere important.

I was reminded of a dream I once had, where I was at the controls of an enormous, heavy steam locomotive, running it slowly forwards, trying to pretend that it was in my control. The scene was a school playground and playing fields during the lunch break - there were hordes of teenage boys running about, dressed in smart black trousers and blazers with school crests on the pockets. They were criss-crossing the line cheerfully as part of their games, almost oblivious of the train.

Somehow I managed to stop the train, as it had come to the buffer at the end of the line. For some reason, I decided to reverse back along it, but as there was no reversing mirror, I had no way of knowing how many boys would be crushed to death under the wheels as I did so. I just put the thing into reverse, tried to go slowly, and hoped for the best. Maybe they would keep out of the way. Perhaps the blame for any deaths would fall on someone else.

On the whole, this dream is not a bad description of what it has felt like trying to pastor a church. I'm afraid it does not sound very good at all.

Returning to the crocodile, I finally began to face up to how much the brute might represent myself. This was not an easy step to take. But when I began to do so, I remembered a scene in Alice and Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll. Alice complained to the caterpillar that when she had tried earlier to say 'How doth the little busy bee,' it all came out different (chapter 5):-

'How doth the little crocodile  
Improve his shining tail,  
And pour the waters of the Nile  
On every golden scale!

'How cheerfully he seems to grin,  
How neatly spread his claws  
And welcome little fishes in  
With gently smiling jaws!'

'I'm sure those are not the right words,' said poor Alice and her eyes filled with tears again... (chapter 2)."

On reflection, this seemed to speak into the church setting. I had wanted to be an active, godly, Christian worker, like a busy bee, which can correctly be described as a 'worker' bee. However, despite my best intentions, it would be easy enough to end up consuming the very people I was trying to help, like the crocodile consuming the fish. It was a dreadful thought that because of past hurts, a pastor might actually end up damaging and destroying those for whom Jesus had died, by the way he did his job. Was this true of me, I wondered?

It might be tempting to dismiss this line of thought, but the idea is not so fanciful, and there are echoes of it in Scripture. Psalm 14:4 runs, "Will evildoers never learn - those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on the Lord?" Similarly, Ezekiel 34 speaks of shepherds that abuse and even kill the sheep in their care (v3).

At the end of the chapter on casting out evil spirits, we suggested that it might be helpful to start with the leaders. This idea may have seemed unnecessary or unhelpful to some. However, in a church which appears to have been out of tune with what Jesus called for, the thought that the leadership could be in severe spiritual difficulty does not seem so far fetched.

Once again, we are confronted with the awesome responsibility laid on those who would be leaders in Christ's church. How they need to watch themselves, and how much they need the prayers of their flock! It seems that deliverance and inner healing from their hurts is not just an optional extra for those who like that kind of thing; it is an essential to safeguard the Body of Christ. Christian leaders need to be able to copy Jesus, who laid down his life for his sheep, rather than risk themselves becoming the very wolves that come in to ravage the flock (Acts 20:29). They will not manage to do this if their own hurts have not been touched by Christ. Christians, pray for your pastors.

Taken as a whole, the images of the crocodile and steam train may seem daunting. These disturbing thoughts arose from listening to God. They would not be suitable for sharing in a public meeting of the church, since prophecy given to be shared there is for strengthening, encouragement and comfort (1 Cor 14:3). While this is a good guide as to what it is appropriate to share publicly, it is not a good test of whether an alleged prophecy is from God or not. If we look at the biblical prophets, we find that their message was often far from palatable.

Receiving the word of God for transmission to others could be compared to swallowing a scroll; in the mouth it tasted sweet, but in the stomach it tasted bitter (Rev 10:9-11, cf Ezek 3:3-4). It may seem to be good fun to receive a message from God, until you realise what the message means. Then passing it on can be hard, almost insupportable on occasion (Jer 20:7-9).

In fact, in Scripture, the message of the prophets was generally rejected, and they themselves tended to come to a sticky end. We should think twice before asking for the gift of prophecy. Those who receive messages from God need wisdom to know what to do with them (Prov 1:7).

Finally, an encouraging story. When I was in teaching, I used to be called on to give an occasional thought for the day at the morning assembly. After a while, I realised that I would often get the idea of what to say when spending time praying at home. In fact, I came to rely on this phenomenon. At the time, I did not recognise this process as prophecy; that understanding only emerged later.

However, there was one Tuesday, when I was due to speak, when no thought seemed to come. I had expected to get the theme on Sunday, or maybe Monday morning, but nothing came. I listened to the news on Monday night, but still had no idea. On Tuesday morning, my mind was still blank. I did not just want to say any old thing, so I travelled to the school wondering if I might witness something which would give me my theme, and even read the register to my form with no idea of what I was going to say in a few minutes' time.

Walking through the corridor to the assembly hall, I met the RE teacher who was in charge of assemblies. Somewhat embarrassed, I told her that to my perplexity I had nothing to say to them today. She apologised profusely - she had forgotten to let me know that the assembly that day had been cancelled.

I soon realised that as there was no assembly, no message had been given. This boosted my confidence enormously. I decided then never to speak at a Christian gathering without having a sense that God had given me a line on what to say. I wish I could say I had kept to this 100 percent since, but I have not. I hope I have managed it seventy percent of the time, but even that may be an overstatement. This I regret. Its cause is my failure to ask, not God's failure to supply.

I commend this approach to anyone who stands up to address people in the name of Christ. The occasion is his, after all, not ours. He is the potter, and we are the clay, not vice versa (Jer 18:1-6). As we considered earlier, Christian teachers need to be careful that what they teach is truly in line with the Father's will.

The thoughts we have discussed with reference to prophecy bring us to our final chapter, when we look at what it might mean that the church of the future is to be his, not ours.