

SERMON: 15 JULY 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“WALKING WITH INTEGRITY” (Amos 5:23-24; 7:7-15; 9:13-15)

Well, you couldn't have missed the idea from the readings today that we are going to be thinking about prophecy and, really, what it means to live prophetically and to walk with integrity. These things matter to us, because they really get to the heart of what it means to be human.

I believe that there is a prophetic calling in each one of us, that deep down, there is the call of God, who is the source of our being and that call is leaning towards justice and peace. There is something deep within each of us that longs to see things right, righteous. There is something deep within us that longs to be made straight or to be straight. It gets to the very heart of what it means to be human.

God has shown us in Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, that we are his and that his life, this life of Christ, is truly who we are. We are to have the same life as Christ and to live in that same way so, in many ways, of course, the plumb-line is Christ Jesus, that is the measure to which we are invited to live up to, and that love, joy, peace and justice are the foundations, not only of God's throne, but of our lives. They are fully who we are, deep down.

That's why when we see something wrong, and you learn this from childhood, we have a deep down longing and calling for justice and whenever we see strife or injustice, somebody being badly treated, then something deep within us shifts and wants to cry out and rail against that which is not right. So, are you with me? We are a people of justice, because that's who we truly are. We long to see things made right.

That's why at times we have to speak truth to power, we have to speak out, we have to take a stand against injustice, because to say or do nothing would be wrong.

Now, some people say “Ah, but...”, “Ah, but Christians shouldn't get involved in politics.” Well, that is simply daft. Because you can't not be involved in politics. Even to say nothing is to say something. Who was it who said – “All that needs to happen for evil to prevail is for good people to say nothing”? So, you're involved in politics – we're all involved in politics. Politics is about governing the polis, the city, the place where we live. That's what it's all about. It's government and all of us are involved in that and so, your life is important, because it's meant for helping build a better world for everyone.

Indeed, we might go as far as saying that, unless our lives are helping to create a better world for people to live in, then they are of little use. Unless our lives are used to help make a better world for people to live in, then they are of little use.

Because God, through Christ, is partnering the people like you and me to create a better world for people to live in.

So I wonder what better worlds might God be inviting you to help create – in our own homes, our workplaces, our communities.

- It might be simple little things, like planting a tree in the middle of wasteland, (*I know someone who did that this week*) in a prophetic demonstration that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it and that this land belongs to the Lord.
- It might be inviting a neighbour to come and share a cup of tea.
- It might be visiting a lonely person.

These are prophetic acts because they help to create a better world for people to live in. We're all invited to participate in that process.

Simple acts can change atmospheres and lives, when people act justly and seek to do the right thing.

It might be supporting Fair Trade, because there's a lot of "Unfair Trade" in this world, so that can be a prophetic act, if you decide to support Fair Trade or, say, encourage ethical business practice. To be honest in our dealings with one another. These are prophetic acts.

Think of some of the prophetic things that people have done in the past because of their faith's desire to create a better world, a fairer world.

- You might think of William Wilberforce and the actions to end slavery, or George Wishart and Patrick Hamilton, in the time of the Scottish Reformation, standing up against the injustices which the Church was perpetuating.
- Martin Luther.....
- Robert Owen, who decided to build a fair place for people to work and receive a living wage and for families to thrive.

These were prophets.

- Martin Luther King, of course, had a dream.
- In years of discrimination of black people, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Most of these organisations and movements were moved by people who were moved by faith. They realised that there was this call for justice in the very essence of who they are and they couldn't not speak out.

Recently there have been some American Christians arrested for protesting against some of the politics in America. Shane Claiborne was one of them – someone you will know, who spoke at CLAN Gathering two or three years ago, was arrested for protesting peacefully against that policy of separating children from immigrant families in America that is there at the moment. He couldn't not speak out against that and we need to do that, too, when our hearts are moved with that call for

justice, when we recognise that something's not right, we need to speak out about it and I wonder if, when we are living in days where, more and more, we will need to speak out and let our voice be heard and to bring to the table a different policy, one which, of course, is based in the foundation of love and justice and peace and the value of God's kingdom.

Some people recently have spoken out against sectarian attacks not very far from here, that have taken place, terrible things and we need to speak out against these things.

Now, this call from deep within is part of what I think it means to live a life of integrity. Psalm 20:7 says "The Godly walk with integrity – blessed are their children after them". In other words, when we decide to listen to that voice of justice and live in integrity, it has an implication for our family, the children who come after us.

Proverbs 11:3 – "The integrity of the upright guides them" and, of course, the Bible's full of examples of people who lived, walking with integrity, trying to live morally upright lives. Think of Abimelech, in Genesis 20, when he gets Abraham's wife, Sarah, he then realises it's his wife, but he acts with integrity, he doesn't do what he could have done and Job is displayed, of course, by God as a person of complete and utter integrity. Nehemiah, in chapter 5, refuses to act in the same way as the governors before him have acted. In other words, skimming off the poor, demanding a pact for being the governor and having the choicest food and the best treatment, which he could have taken, but he chose not to do it – that's a prophetic act. Daniel's rule, under King Darius – Daniel was faithful and law-abiding, in a way that rulers before him had not been. Paul's ministry – he refuses to be a burden to the Corinthians. He pays his own way, he doesn't live off people who couldn't afford to support him and then, of course, Jesus, the Plumb-line, the Way, the Pattern, the Life (of integrity and justice). So this deep call within us is who we truly are then.

The word used for integrity, in the Bible, the Hebrew word, is a word which means to be made complete, to be made full and to become upright.

So it is a process – none of us is yet complete, but when we listen to that voice of justice and integrity, we become more complete, we become more straight. Our lives bend towards integrity.

So what does that look like to continue to walk with integrity? Well, I think to live a life that practises what it preaches -

- a life that seeks to be honest and transparent
- a life that longs for justice, speaks up for truth, even in the face of power
- a life that is full of hope
- a life that dreams of a better world

- a life that is grounded with God
- a life that trusts in God to bring greater completeness

Someone who is speaking out prophetically for a more just and equal world to happen is a person called Richard Rohr and he has written a couple of really interesting things. You can find these things online, if you just look for “Contemplation in action”. One of his quotes is as follows -

“Only the contemplative mind has the ability to hold the reality of what is and the possibility of what could be.” In other words you might look around and see there’s a lot of injustice and things aren’t right. How do we begin? Well, we need to begin in contemplation. We need to be rooted in the source. We need to be listening to God’s voice of justice. That’s the most important thing. We need to be rooted in contemplation, making time to listen and then turn that contemplation into action. He goes on *“Unless our hearts are transformed, our fears will continue to manipulate our politics, reinforcing a polarized and divided society.”*

“We must bring as much passion to our cause as do those who call for building walls. But our job is to tear down walls and build bridges, to grow into a new identity that holds space for everyone to belong and be loved”

Here is somebody who is speaking out against things that are clearly against God’s kingdom and he’s worth listening to, but his main point I want to bring to you is it’s got to be about being rooted in God, it’s got to be about being rooted in that contemplation, to listening to that still voice that is within each of us.

Let me end with something that you can find on the Church of Scotland website. There’s a video there called “Praying Prophetically” and here is the text of that video, which you might find interesting

“In your praying do you long with God for a world of more justice, more trust, more equality, more love. Do you lament the suffering you see and protest its causes. Do you wrestle over how to be faithful to God without falling into despair? Do you question de-humanising systems and seek God’s wisdom on what to do? All this is praying prophetically. What stories could you tell that have you tearing your hair out about the unfairness and wrong in the world. Praying prophetically is grieving with God over such stories, yet never giving up, not on other people on ourselves, on our prayers or on our God. And when we have no words of our own, what great allies we find in the prophets of the Bible, like Habbakuk – “How long, O Lord, must I cry to you and you will not listen. Destruction and violence are all around me and justice never wins.”

Like Jeremiah – “God, why do the guilty have it so good? Why do the dishonest do so well?”

Like Joel – “I cry out to you, Lord. We look on helpless as our crops are destroyed. Our fields are laid to waste as though fire had burned them.”

Speaking honestly and fearlessly to God and to society is not for the faint-hearted. But do it! Pray it like it is. Complain. Protest. Grieve. Question. Then ask for help. And dream of a world put right. Never give up!"

("Praying Prophetically" – Jo Love)

Let us pray. God, thank you that you've placed the cry for justice and righteousness deep within each one of us. May we not only hear that cry, but may we act it out. In Jesus' name and for the sake of your kingdom.

Amen