

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

6/7 November 2021

Welcome

Welcome again everybody. If I were to say the name “Greta”, what comes to mind? Long ago it might have been Greta Garbo or Greta from Hansel and Gretel. Today, the same conjure up Greta Thunberg who has become known around the globe. The young Swedish climate change campaigner had harsh words to say about COP26 in Glasgow. She has dismissed the conference as “failure” and a “PR event.” In her own words:

“The leaders are not doing nothing, they are actively creating loopholes and shaping frameworks to benefit themselves and to continue profiting from this destructive system.”

I hope she is wrong and I’m sure she hopes she is wrong because so much depends on it. Still, it is great to have her voice – young, clear, passionate, willing to take on the powerful and still only 18 years of age. She’s not the only “prophet”. Al Gore has been agitating on the same crucial issue for decades. In Ireland, there are many figures including the Fr Sean McDonagh, the Columban missionary who worked for many years in the Philippines. His YouTube videos on climate change are inspiring.

Topic

The world needs, we need such prophetic figures – to speak the truth the power and to call out the hypocrisy of the powerful.

Steps

Jesus was himself a prophet, well able to deliver inconvenient truths. He is unsparing in today’s Gospel: empty show and greedy exploitation are always risks in formal religion. There is nothing new in this. The roots of his critique lie firmly in his Jewish faith. Within that faith, there is repeated and marked concern for the vulnerable, especially widows and orphans – found in the Law, the prophets and the Psalms. Just as strongly, when prophets see hypocrisy in religious practice, they name it. My long-time favourite comes from Amos. The prophet is speaking in the voice of God:

Spare me the din of your chanting,
let me hear none of your strumming on lyres,
let justice flow like water,
and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23-24)

Formalised religion easily declines into empty show without substance. The illusion is that when you’ve done your prayer, you’re done. Which is not true! Tragically, this is familiar to us from recent Irish church history. If you don’t mind a mixed metaphor, the high moral ground is a draughty spot and if the king has no clothes it will soon be apparent to all.

So the prophets need to be direct and hard-hitting. Is there a positive message in all this? Yes, of course. The prophets speak negatively so as to bring about change and so does Jesus. The opposite of hypocrisy is an integrated, authentic life so that what you see is what you get. As I really am, so I am before others, before myself, before God. Another prophet, Micah, described the good life in poetic terms:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Notice the three characteristics, justice (in society), kindness (in my personal life) and walking humbly with my God. An integrated, authentic spiritual life will bring all three into harmony because you cannot really have one without the other. That short passage from Micah 6:8 could easily become a kind of motto for the way we would like to live.

Conclusion

So, in a word, prophets are good for us. Greta Thunberg resembles the prophets of the Bible, speaking inconvenient truths, an awkward person. The Old Testament prophets were also awkward people – Jesus was awkward– but of course just because you're awkward doesn't mean you are a prophet! Still, we need their voices especially today to stop us sleepwalking into disaster. They remind us that things can and should be different, that there is a better way.