

# **DO WE LISTEN TO THE PROPHETS?**

**(A Series of Advent Reflections Offered in 1990)**

By

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### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my wife and family who encouraged me to offer these reflections to a wider public, and to Marjorie Tate for the editing of my manuscript.

## **FOREWORD**

When we hear or see the word “God” today it is important to know what a speaker or writer means by the word. Our understanding of words is often changing as our understanding of the world itself is changing. We no longer believe that we live in a three-storeyed universe and that the earth is at the centre. Ongoing developments in the study of evolution have changed the understanding about life and its origins and the earth’s place in the universe.

During my lifetime additional information has been discovered concerning the origins of Christianity which has changed my interpretation of “God”.

I have come to think of “God” to be the creative intelligent spirit (energy) that is everywhere throughout the universe and present in all life. This creative Spirit seeks to enable all who are willing to be the energy for good wherever they live. “God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Similarly, the word “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, the meaning of which, for the Jews, meant “a Special Messenger” who was to come and restore the Kingdom of Israel.

Jesus, a Jew, while believing he was a special messenger, did not see his mission was to rule the Kingdom of Israel. Mark’s gospel indicates that Jesus sought by word and deed to call people to a different way of life – a way of *love, i.e. agape love, unconditional caring for all people* (vastly different from that which was current in their time). Those who followed Jesus’ teaching were known as the People of the Way. Through time I have come to consider Jesus to be the messenger of this creative energy, intelligent spirit, and the example of this Way of Life, lived in love for all, even unto death. What could his *Way of Life* mean for us in our day and time?

Our word “prophet” comes from the Greek *prophetes* which means one who speaks forth, speaks for someone else. In Hebrew, the word was *nabi* which meant to call, one who calls, a spokesperson, one who is called.

Thus the Old Testament prophets were not understood to be predictors of far distant events but they were individuals who had a profound awareness that, in the course of history, human acts bring with them certain consequences.

Their primary responsibility was to proclaim the message they believed they had received from God to their own generation in such a way that it could be heard and heeded. Therefore it was usually proclaimed before a live audience. It presupposes that there is a group of people concerned enough to listen and then to do something about it.

The prophet usually addresses a particular situation and a particular group of people. To understand the prophet's message we need to know the historical background which called it forth.

However some of their words are universal and timeless which makes them just as relevant today, like certain poetry which has within it a common human experience and is therefore able to speak to ever generation.

The decisions his hearers made in response to his words would affect a person's life and the nation's life. To ignore the prophet would be disastrous, as the history of that ancient people shows.

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## THE VOICE OF GOD

(I) As heard by Samuel.

### TEXT:

*"Speak, thy servant hears thee."*

1 Samuel 3:10

### INTRODUCTION

I don't remember the day of the week, or the date, but I remember the moment as clearly as if it happened just yesterday.

It was during the war while we were under German occupation. I was in the back yard when I heard my name called. I ran to the kitchen door and asked who had called, only to be told that I must have been mistaken, for nobody had called my name.

I was twelve years old. It was an experience I never forgot. Years later when, as a factory worker in Smith Falls, I experienced my call to the ministry, the meaning of that earlier experience became clear.

Ever since I have believed in a God who is personal. A God who seeks out individuals for specific responsibilities. Ever since, the story of Samuel has had special significance for me.

If it were the only story of its kind you would be justified in dismissing it as the vivid imagination of a child. However, similar stories are to be found not only in the Old and New Testaments, but also in Christian literature.

### A) WHY SAMUEL?

The better known stories in the Old Testament tell of the experiences of Abraham, Gideon, Deborah, Moses, Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. While in the New Testament we have the story of Paul and, in the centuries since, the stories of Augustine, Francis of Assisi and a host of others, saints and martyrs, to the present-day stories of such men as Peter Marshall, told by his wife in her book *A Man Called Peter*.

Each one who has this kind of experience asks themselves the question, "Why me?"

The same reality is portrayed in the popular movies *O God, Book One* and *O God, Book Two*.

There the call of God comes to a grocery store clerk and a little girl, both nobodies in real life.

This is true to the biblical story. Those whom God confronts, those whom God calls to particular

service, are usually individuals seen to have no importance in either the secular world or the religious community.

Why?

Why Samuel? Why Abraham? Why Deborah? Why Moses? Why Amos? Why Paul? Why me? Why anyone?

There is no definitive answer. All we have are perhaps a few scattered clues in such stories as the story of Samuel. For Samuel the key person was probably his mother Hannah. Barren for many years, made fun of by her husband's other wife, driven to her knees in prayer by her sense of uselessness, she pleads with God for a child.

If such a gift were given she promises to dedicate such a child to God. Samuel was dedicated to God by his mother before his birth. Before even he was conceived. Following his birth, as soon as he was weaned, she took him to the Temple and gave her son to the priest Eli, that he might be trained in the service God.

Hannah took the promise she made to God very seriously. She was not one who simply doffed her cap to God. Her promise was seen as a commitment that could not be broken. Every year she made a new coat for her son and delivered it personally to him at Shiloh.

It could not have been easy to give up her first-born son. It must have made a profound impression upon Samuel. He knew from a very early age that he had been given to God, for God to use as God chose.

And what were Samuel's responsibilities? He trimmed the lamps that were kept burning before the Ark of the Covenant, symbol of God's presence with His people. He kept the temple floor clean, swept the floors, opened the doors in the morning and locked up at night. He was the temple janitor.

We can only assume that he also had long conversations with Eli, through which the boy Samuel learned about the faith and the God his people worshipped. But the Scriptures tell us nothing of this. They simply say, "But the young Samuel, as he grew up, commended himself to the Lord and to men." Words that remind us of those spoken of Jesus' childhood. Samuel performed his humble tasks faithfully and then one day God called him to a new task, one with greater responsibilities. As he had been faithful in the little things, so he was prepared for larger responsibilities.



But why Samuel? Because of a mother's prayers, a mother's commitment? Because he was able to accept his being committed to God's service by his mother? Because he was willing to serve faithfully as the servant of Eli?

It is a story that should push us to think about our own baptism. How seriously do we take that commitment made on our behalf by our parents? It is a story that should push us to ask about the baptism of our children. Did we really commit them to the service of God? Is that the way we understand baptism – a giving of our children to God, for God to do with them as God pleases? Are we faithful in the routine responsibilities we have been given? Are we faithful servants of God, at work, at home, within the congregation?

It is questions such as these that the story of Samuel pushes me to struggle with.

## B) HIS MESSAGE AND HIS TASK

Having recognized the voice of God, Samuel received the age-old message and the age-old task. Initially it was a message of doom. Eli and his family were finished. Eli's sons had betrayed God's trust. As priests at Shiloh, they had used their power to take what was not lawfully theirs. By their bad example they had led the people astray.

In the renewed Philistine offensive, Israel is defeated and the Ark captured. Such events indicated to the people that God had deserted them. Eli's sons are killed in battle and, when the news reaches Eli, he himself dies.

The Old Testament writers interpret all such catastrophes as the logical outcome of the people's worshipping other gods. Thus Samuel's message to the people is similar to that of the future prophets like Amos and Hosea and John the Baptist. It is a message calling the people to repentance – to make a 180° turn.

He says, "If your return to the Lord is whole-hearted, banish foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from your shrines; turn to the Lord with heart and mind, and worship him alone, and he will deliver you from the Philistines." (1 Samuel 7:3)

Following the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, the religious life in Israel continued in decline for some 20 years. Then Samuel called the people together at Mizpah to renew their commitment to Yahweh, their God. While little is recorded of these years, it can be assumed that Samuel was not idle. He returned to his childhood home at Ramah and there, out of the ashes, began to rebuild.

In these years he laid the groundwork that was to enable him to guide Israel through one of the greatest changes in their history. The work of education and reformation had to be done, to a large extent, secretly and silently under the very noses of the Philistines who now ruled the country. There was the very real danger that all Israel would bow the knee to the gods of the Philistines and that the knowledge of the One True God would disappear completely.

Samuel's faith was equal to the task. With infinite patience and a rare devotion he set himself to the tasks of education and moral reformation. He knew it would be a slow process, but gradually he was accepted as a prophet of the Lord. By prayer, by teaching and by example, Samuel kept true religion alive in the land. The people gradually came to see that it was they who had deserted God, rather than God deserting them.

Is there a message here for us? Is there a word from God? Can we hear God speaking to us through the experience of Samuel and his people?

I know that as I struggle with the reality of this world, a world in which there seems to be so much that is not right – so much hunger, so many dying from starvation; war and rumours of war; nations seeking to impose their will on other nations; crime, family breakdown; violence in the home as well as in the streets; so much anger and resentment – the kingdom of God seems so distant, so unattainable, so unrealistic.

The story of Samuel reminds me that despite all evidence to the contrary, we must persevere. We must continue to teach, to preach, to live out the life of the kingdom as best we can, firmly believing that, if we will put our trust in the living God, our God will bring us through our present darkness and distress into the light of a new day.

### C) GOD SPEAKS TODAY

Just as God can still speak to us through the people of the past, our God can and does speak to us through our life experiences in the present. It is not all darkness. There are glimmers of light. There are those who have heard God's call and who seek to push back a little bit of the darkness that seeks to overwhelm us.

In communities all across the land there are those who have committed themselves to the operation of Food Banks in an attempt to push back the darkness of hunger in our own land. There is the coalition of churches that operate the Food Grains Bank which gathers food grains and ships them to the areas of the world in greatest need, bringing a message of hope to the starving multitudes.

We have the example of Mother Theresa in India, ministering to the thousands of street people, many of whom die on the streets of the major cities of that country. We have the attempt of one of our own United Church ministers to meet the needs of the millions of street children in Brazil by setting up boys' villages.

We heard a couple of weeks ago from our Outreach Committee concerning Bridge Head, and the opportunity for us to support cottage industries in developing countries. It is an attempt to see that the producers get their rightful share of the profits of their labour.

One United Church congregation, I know, has over the years built a school in Sierra Leone, a TB Clinic in Haiti, providing an X-ray machine and a home for a resident nurse. All this was over and above their regular Mission & Service allocation. They are a congregation that aims to give away as much as they spend on themselves.

One of our teaching missionaries, while in Kenya, travelled at her own expense through that country, securing 120 jobs for her students during their work term.

At the end of September we heard from M2W2, a person to person ministry to those in prison. There is a need to establish a coordinating committee in Orillia that a ministry to Beaver Creek and other such institutions in the area may be organized. This is another opportunity to banish a little of the loneliness, the darkness, the sense of being unwanted and uncared for from the lives of some of God's children.

I would be delighted to hear from anyone wishing to become involved.

Why do people do these sorts of things? Why are some so willing to give so much of themselves?

A long time ago Paul, speaking of one of his smaller congregations who had made a surprisingly large contribution to the poor in Jerusalem, said of them "first, they gave themselves to the Lord."

I remember discussing this question at a mission workshop some years ago. As we talked with some members of one group who had done so much, it became clear that in that particular congregation there was a core group who had done what that early Christian congregation had done, they had given themselves to the Lord.

Samuel was able to maintain the faith and lead Israel into a new era of their history because, first and foremost, he was dedicated. He had been given to the Lord and he had accepted that commitment. As God speaks to us through the commitment of His people in the past, so today

God continues to speak to us as we see the dedication and commitment of His people in the present.

Those in this congregation who have given of their time and resources in support of the three refugee families you have sponsored, demonstrate this sort of commitment.

God continue to call us to an ever deeper commitment.

## CONCLUSION

It is a Word of God that runs throughout the Scriptures. It is a word from God needing to be heard and responded to today and every day.

In thirty-two years of ordained ministry I never remember a time when there were not more needs than there were committed people to meet those needs. I never remember a time when there were enough elders, enough committee members, enough Sunday school teachers, enough mid-week youth leaders, enough Bible study leaders, enough volunteers to carry out visitations as well as to minister to the needs of the community at our door.

The deepening of our commitment is a continuing need. Every baptismal service is both a renewal of our commitment to God as well as a commitment of our children. Every communion service, every time we break the bread and drink of the cup, is another opportunity for renewal of our commitment. Every service of Worship is an attempt to lead us into the presence of God that we may hear what God is saying to us, what God is asking of us, that we may respond with a deeper commitment of ourselves. We do have a committed core – we have dedicated Sunday school teachers, dedicated youth leaders, dedicated women in the United Church, dedicated choir and many individuals who work tirelessly on the Official Board and on the committees and in the community – but there are gaps.

We are a busy people. But is our busy-ness always the outcome of our Christian commitment? Are all the things we do equally important? Are they all necessary? What is the ultimate meaning of our busy-ness?

It is a perpetual struggle for me, as I am sure it is for you. How should I spend my time? What is most important? Is God calling me to attend more committee meetings, visit more homes, hold more Bible Studies, or spend more time at home? Or just be still that I may refocus my life on the One who called me in the first place?

To have said with Samuel, “Speak Lord, thy servant heareth,” is not the end of the journey but the first step in a life-long struggle to be the person God in Christ is calling us to be. The task He

has for us to do is not always clear. The call is to live each day according to the light, according to the understanding we have, at the same time praying that our God who is the Lord of Light will lead us step by step along the road He has for us to follow.



## THE VOICE OF GOD

(II) As heard by Amos.

TEXT:

*"Let justice roll down like a river  
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."*

Amos 5:24

### INTRODUCTION

The Word of God comes to us from the prophet of old, the call for justice and righteousness. Are such ideals possible in the sort of world we live in? What do such ideals really mean? What is justice and righteousness in the face of the reality that a country like Brazil, who owes over 300 billion dollars, is unable not only to pay anything on the principle, but no interest either? The same thing is true of most Latin American countries and developing countries. The only thing that keeps them from going bankrupt is the refinancing of unpayable debt.

Our own financial house is in no better order. Our national debt is growing at the rate of 30-plus billion dollars annually. How long can we continue spending more than we are earning. What is the just and righteous thing to do?

Minority groups around the world have been turning to violence for some time. We always thought it was the sort of thing that happened in other countries but not in Canada. This summer OKA declared we are no different. The injustices, pushed under the carpet for 100 years, spilled over. While the barricades are down, the issues remain. Without a just settlement the barricades will go up again all across the country.

But what is a just and righteous settlement?

The pressure of our economic problems sees the national government cutting spending on the social safety net. The numbers of poor are growing. The numbers of those on welfare are growing. This means that health care cost will continue to escalate as it is a proven fact that poverty and poor health are tied together.

Of course, if we continue to walk a road in the middle east that will inevitably lead to conflict, the ensuing conflagration may take care of all these other problems, whether we find a just and righteous solution or not.

But what is the just response? Should we be interfering between two equally despotic rulers for whom the rights of men, women and children, of their own nation, let alone those of other nations, are not worthy of any consideration at all?

In the face of doom and gloom, our fears and frustrations, the Christmas shopping madness will once again grip us – or will it? Will this year be different?

While the recession has caused some falling off of house prices and the dropping of some rents, we are still a nation in which the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer. In many of our major cities people live on the streets and all across the country food banks are having difficulty keeping up with the demand for food. In Toronto, according to a recent report, the numbers have almost tripled in a year. With increasing numbers of plants closing, and the lay-off of thousands of workers, the changes in unemployment insurance benefits means this will be an extremely hard winter for many of our brothers and sisters.

#### A) AMOS THE MAN

There are some real similarities between Israel in 760 B.C. and Canada in the 1990s. Israel had become a great trading nation. Israel and Judah controlled Palestine, including parts of Syria to the north and south to the Negev, including the port of Aqabahh. They thus sat astride the great trading routes which connected Egypt with Arabia and Babylon. They had become a wealthy nation.

Archeology has shown that this was a time of real luxury and high cultural achievements. The diggings have uncovered summer homes on the upper mountain slopes, beautifully carved ivories, impressive fortifications around the cities – all of which indicate a time of great prosperity. But with prosperity came injustice. The rich grew richer and the poor poorer. The poor, according to Amos, were being ground down by economic tyrants who, with the sanction of the courts, “sold the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes”.

It was in the midst of life in this society that Amos heard the voice of God, and was called to be a prophet. The record tells us that he was not a professional prophet, neither was he of the priestly class. He was not one who was considered to be part of the religious establishment, nor was he wealthy. In fact, he was a “nobody”, a simple shepherd from Tekoa, a village of Judah, some six miles from Bethlehem. It was in an area known as the wilds of Judah: “... all the region round Tekoa is a welter of limestone hills; on their slopes and in their winding valleys that ran between them a scanty growth provides but a bare subsistence for flocks of sheep and goats.” (Interpreters Bible, p. 763). It was an area noted for its rugged grandeur.

Amos could not help but be influenced by the nature of the countryside in which he grew up and the society of which he was a part. He was a man of tremendous powers of observation and reflection. He was a man of insight, seeing clearly the faults and failings of his society. Along with his sheep herding he collected the fruit of the sycamore tree, the rather insipid fruit



eaten by the very poor. This suggests that his flocks could not have been large, and life was a constant struggle to survive.

And yet the book of Amos indicates that Amos was no ignorant country bumpkin. His writing gives evidence of his mastery of his own language and an extensive knowledge and understanding of the surrounding countries. He shows a grasp of history and the factors that go towards making a society what it is. His knowledge of other nations includes their national characteristics, their origins and their geography.

But most important of all, he had a knowledge and understanding of God that was far ahead of his time. Schools and universities did not exist in the hills of Tekoa. His education was from life itself. W.R. Smith, in his book *Prophets of Israel*, tells us:

“Among the Hebrews, as in the Arabian desert, knowledge and oratory were not affairs of professional educators, or dependent for their cultivation on wealth and social status. The sum of book learning was small, men of all ranks mingled with that oriental freedom which is so foreign to us, shrewd observation, a memory retentive of traditional lore, and the faculty for original reflection took the place of laborious study as the ground of acknowledged intellectual pre-eminence.”

The character of Amos shines through his writing clearly. He was bold, but it was a boldness of indifference rather than passion. His courage came from a kind of fatalism rather than from enthusiasm. He was accurate in his observation, scientific in his habit of mind. He not only saw the facts but could describe them vividly. He proclaimed the divine law and its effect on life in the present. He did not paint frightening pictures of the distant future. His concern was for the present.

Thus we see an austere man, sitting in judgement upon the nation, stern and uncompromising. He was an advocate of the one true God, a prophet of gloom seeing little real hope for Israel.

## B) HIS MESSAGE

Despite the prosperity of the times in which he lived, Amos, prophet of God, saw nothing that would indicate anything other than the destruction of the nation. His message fell on deaf ears. The people believed that Yahweh, their God, was one among many. Within the boundaries of their Nation, Yahweh was supreme, but beyond those boundaries Yahweh had no authority. Therefore Yahweh was a God who could only be concerned with them. They were his people. Without them no-one would know that Yahweh existed.

This meant that, while they were required to attend the feasts and keep the rituals to keep Yahweh happy, he could not turn from them for long. They believed that Yahweh had to fight their battles, preserve their borders, even extend their borders to prove that he was more powerful than the gods of other nations and thus worthy of their allegiance. A point of view not so very different from many people's understanding of God today.

Amos was opposed to such shallowness. His training in the wilds of Tekoa, his observation of other nations, his understanding of their history along with his closeness to God, enabled him to proclaim certain convictions which were to influence religious thinking for years to come. He believed in an all-powerful God: "It is He who forges the thunder and creates the wind, who showers abundant rain on the earth, who darkens the dawn with thick clouds and marches over the heights of the earth - - His name is the Lord of Hosts." (Amos 4:13)

He maintains that Yahweh, their God, is responsible for the rain, the locusts, earthquakes and the rise and fall of the Nile. It was this same Yahweh who had led Israel out of Egypt and who also led the Syrians from Kir and the Philistines from Caphtor. Yahweh, their God, was in charge of Nature, and the movements of all people. He is then the God of all nations and not the private property of Israel.

At the same time Amos believes that Israel was a people chosen by God: "For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the earth." But this chosen-ness was not for privilege but for responsibility. They were expected to live out a certain quality of life. It was because this quality was absent that Amos could do no other than proclaim doom to the nation. While the nation was prosperous, Amos knew that much of it had been obtained dishonestly. There was injustice in the land. Israel was guilty of social crimes. Therefore she was unfaithful to her calling as the people of God. In the economy of God such a society must change or it must go.

Amos saw little willingness to change. He saw the wealthy lusting for more economic power, trampling the poor; public leaders revelling in luxury and corrupted by self-indulgence, lying on beds of ease unconcerned for the impending ruin of their country. He saw sophisticated ladies, whom he described as cows of Bashan, selfishly urging their husbands to greater efforts. He saw the law courts being used to serve the vested interests of the commercial class.

And through it all the religious leaders said nothing. They made no protest against the inhumanities to man carried out within the shadows of the major centres of worship. And so the prophet declares that God hates what is going on: "Take away from me the voice of your songs, to the melodies of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:23-24)

At the same time Amos believes that the people are free to choose: "Seek good and not evil that you may live, that the Lord the God of hosts may be firmly on your side, as you say he is." (Amos 5:14)

With his message of gloom, Amos hopes to shatter the people's complacency so that they might once again put their trust in God rather than in economics and politics. Amos was not listened to. In 725 Israel was destroyed by her enemies.

### C) HIS MESSAGE FOR TODAY

Is it possible for someone who lived so long ago to have a Word from God for us? Is it possible that we have been so anaesthetized by the emphasis on God's love for all people that we have come to believe, as ancient Israel did, that God could never be angry with us? Do we believe that we can do as we please, live as we please, and God will do nothing about it?

Amos may have lived 750 years before Christ but our times are very similar. We have for some years enjoyed unparalleled prosperity. But on what has our prosperity been built?

The depression of the dirty thirties was cured by the Second World War. Since then the Korean War, the Vietnam War kept our economies thriving. One of the realities is that we do not know how to keep a peace-time economy thriving, that is, an economy that does not depend on massive expenditure on arms.

Aid to developing countries has always benefited the donor nation more than the recipient nation. Our prosperity has been built to a large extent at the expense of our less fortunate brothers and sisters. Amos believed that there was a cancer at the heart of his nation and, because of it, they stood on the brink of total disaster. Could this be true for us?

Amos spoke out against dishonesty in high places, wealth that was accumulated by bribery violence and deceit. His concern was for real justice, right relationships between a man and his neighbour, between an employer and employee, between merchant and customer, between elected official and elector. He pointed to the lessons of history. Wherever and whenever injustice has been allowed to prosper, sooner or later such a nation falls.

We too have politicians who say one thing and then do the opposite. We too have employees who short change their employers. We too have employers who seek to deny their employees their rights. We too enjoy a high standard of living, in part because of unemployment in our own country, and because of the sweat shops of Korea, Latin America and Taiwan, and the field workers of Mexico, California and the Philippines.

Amos speaks to our day when he emphasizes the fact that to be God's people involves the responsibility of living according to God's will and purpose, or losing our place in the plan of God.

Western civilization grew out of a solid Christian foundation. We were entrusted with great resources and potential for world justice. But what have we done with what was entrusted to us? Today, throughout the western world, the Christian faith is becoming a minority religion – a situation that is pushing us to struggle to rediscover our identity and purpose, our reason for being.

The New Testament is very clear as to who we are supposed to be. We have been called to be the Light. We have been entrusted with Christ's ministry of reconciliation. We have been called

to be living examples of God's loving concern for all people. We have been called to bring God's justice to all nations, all races. We have been called to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Judgement always falls first on the house of the Lord. To whom much has been given, much is expected. Amos, on behalf of God, says: "I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Why? Because, when the Israelites left their worship, they practised dishonesty and injustice. They said one thing with their lips but the way they lived their lives told quite a different story. Such worship, Amos believed, was an insult to God.

Could this be true? How do we live when we leave our worship? Does what we do here make a difference to the way we live, the way we live with our spouse, our children, our neighbours, those in need no matter where they live? What sort of day's work do we give our employer? What do we do for the needy in our own community, the lonely, the sick, the out of work, the stranger, those in trouble with drugs, alcohol, those who are abused physically and mentally and emotionally? Could our worship be simply a religious mask we put on once a week for an hour?

"To worship rightly is to love each other  
each kindly deed of love a prayer."

## CONCLUSION

Amos heard the voice of God and brought to his people a Living Word. Few, if any, paid attention. The people of his day did not take him seriously. He was unable to change the path his nation was following. They refused to see the precipice that was right in front of them. But, because he spoke a Living Word, that Word has lived on, looking for receptive soil in which it can take root and grow.

And so, once again, that Living Word is proclaimed. God once again calls his people to seek justice for all the nations and races, all God's children. God calls his people to live responsibly, to live in love as he has loved us. It is a word that presents us with a choice. The future will be determined by the choices we make today.

Some years ago Western nations decided to arm Iraq to stop Iran from taking over the Middle East oil fields. It was also good for the arms business. But today those same weapons are now pointing at us. Ten years ago the voters in England decided to turn sharply right. Today the gap between rich and poor is greater than it has ever been. Their economy is in shambles. There are 750,000 waiting to get into hospital. Urban decay is everywhere. Justice and righteousness for all are hardly a reality. Last summer many of us were horrified at the pictures shown on TV of the OKA barricades and the actions of the police, soldiers, local residents and our native people. True, little blood was shed – this time. But if there is a next time, the outcome may not be as bloodless.

We still have time to make choices. We can choose to support policies and programs that will be just for all. Or we can choose to support policies and programs that will favour one group over another. As Christians we need to ask ourselves, what is God's will? What does it mean to support justice and righteousness in the land? Where would Jesus stand on the issues of our day? Are we prepared to stand with him, no matter what the cost?

God spoke through Amos saying:

"I hate, I spurn your pilgrim feasts; I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies.  
When you present your sacrifices and offerings I will not accept them...  
Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."



## THE VOICE PROPHECY

### (III) Who's the Boss?

#### TEXT:

*"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*

*Then Isaiah said: Here am I, send me."*

Isaiah 6:8

#### INTRODUCTION

*Who's the Boss?* is a TV sit-com that I am sure you are all familiar with. It's fun to watch, but it never really answers the question. I suspect that if it did, the show would lose much of its appeal.

But in real life the question *Who's the Boss?* is, in most situations, seldom left in doubt. The home may be the exception.

"I'd like to know once and for all," said the irate husband as a domestic argument got under way, "Who's the boss in this house?"

"You'll be much happier," retorted his wife, "if you don't find out."

Such a family conflict is a reflection of a similar tension in our economic, political and social life, both within our nation and internationally.

The National News keeps us informed on a daily basis, not only concerning the issues at home and abroad, but also on occasion the proposed solutions offered by a variety of aspiring leaders.

But politicians in opposition often speak a different language once they come to power. I suspect one of the reasons is that, at both provincial and federal levels, they discover that the civil service is a powerful force when it comes to enacting new policies. Even those who sit on our local Council are not always as free as they thought they were to do only those things that are in the best interests of the whole community. Interest groups of all types seem to put pressure on members of Council to vote for their view.

At a personal level we can be caught in the middle, feeling ourselves being pulled in a dozen different directions by a variety of competing powers, each seeking to be the one major influence, the boss of our life.

The recent referendum debate was a good illustration. As I read the various articles, both for and against, I was pulled first one way and then the other by equally persuasive arguments. It was easy to become confused. What is the answer?

The prophet Isaiah believed that there could only be one boss in a person's life. For Isaiah the boss of the whole of life was the Lord God Almighty, the Lord of History.

Isaiah sought to serve this One God, and he called the people of his day, both rulers and common folk, to return to that one Lordship.

#### A) A MAN AND HIS TIMES

Isaiah, known today as Isaiah of Jerusalem, lived in the mid-700s B.C. it was a time when Israel and Judah were experiencing unprecedented prosperity. Under the rule of King Uzziah, Judah had taken control of the Palestinian plain and its trade routes. They had extended their control southward to the Gulf of Aqabah which included the copper and iron mines that fed the industrial centres of the ancient world.

But it was not to last. Assyria was beginning to flex her muscles. She too had a dream of an empire encompassing all the land between the Persian Gulf and the Nile.

Uzziah, smitten by leprosy, was replaced by a regent, and then died in 740 B.C. This was the moment in history when God chose to call Isaiah.

Isaiah's name means "*Jehova saves*", or "*Jehova is salvation*". His father was Amos, thought to be the brother of King Amaziah who had ruled before Uzziah.

From the writings of Isaiah we gather that he had a position of some importance in the society of the day. He enjoyed a measure of social privilege, having the ear of the king. Isaiah was married and had at least two children. There were three major events which must have had a marked influence on his life and thinking:

- There was an horrendous earthquake, mentioned by both Amos and Zechariah, and which occurred during the reign of Uzziah.
- There was the preaching of Amos. While Amos exercised his prophetic ministry in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, his home was just a few miles from Jerusalem, the home of Isaiah. As Amos's prophecies were written, they were probably in circulation and would have come to Isaiah's attention.
- Then there was his experience in the Temple. Isaiah, mourning the death of a relative, a friend, as well as king, surrounded by all the familiar elements of Temple worship – the choir singing, the people responding, the high altar with its red hot coals, the clouds of incense billowing up, filling his nostrils with its pungent odour, the priests arrayed in their colourful robes – then the climax, the doors of the holy of holies opened, the place



where they believed God lived and God, the Lord of History, fills the whole Temple. Suddenly Isaiah is lifted out of himself and into the very presence of God. God's presence shakes the very foundation of the Temple. Isaiah is overcome with his own unworthiness. But his lips are touched with a live coal. His sense of guilt is taken away, his sins are forgiven and he hears the call of God – "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And Isaiah responds, "Here I am, send me."

Thus Isaiah finds himself called to be God's messenger to a people whose ears are heavy and dull, whose eyes are blind. His task, to proclaim the God who is the Lord of History, the one and only Boss, who can be ignored at their peril.

## B) ISAIAH'S MESSAGE

His main theme in the first 30 Chapters, which most authorities attribute to Isaiah of Jerusalem, is that God and God alone is in charge of history. However, this was neither a common view, nor was it a popular view.

The general belief, especially among the leadership, was that prosperity and peace come through military conquest and alliances with those who were too powerful to defeat on the field of battle.

Faith and dependence upon God the Lord of History had taken a back seat. Injustice and social concerns would eventually be taken care of as they became more prosperous. The rich were to be encouraged to become richer, so that more of the crumbs might be pushed off their overloaded tables to be enjoyed by the poor and dispossessed. Injustice and poverty would, in time, be eliminated as more crumbs fell from overloaded tables.

Jesus, in his day, told the story of the rich man Dives and the poor man Lazarus who lay at his gate surviving on the scraps thrown to the dogs. Isaiah condemned the nation and pronounced its doom. Jesus said that Dives went to hell and Lazarus to heaven.

Isaiah also condemns his people for their superstition, their dependence on soothsayers, diviners, horoscopes and fortune tellers. He condemns them for crediting their prosperity to idols. He says,

"O sinful nation, people loaded with iniquity, race of evil doers, wonton destructive children who have deserted the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned your backs on him," (Isaiah 1:4)

"Your very rulers are rebels, confederates with thieves, every man of them loves a bribe and itches for a gift, they do not give the orphan his rights, and the widow's cause never comes before them." (Isaiah 1:23)

But at this stage of his career Isaiah is not devoid of hope. He pleads with his people, "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they are dyed crimson, they may be like wool. Obey with a will, and you shall eat the best that earth yields; but if you refuse and rebel locust beans shall be your only food." The words of condemnation are intended to bring about an attitude of repentance, and a turning away from all that displeases God.

But there is no repentance. The people hear the words but fail to respond positively. But Isaiah's hope is maintained by two signs given him by God. His wife gives birth to two children. One is born at the time Judah is threatened by a Syrian invasion. The name of this child is to be Sher-jashub, meaning "a remnant will survive". On the basis of this sign, Isaiah urges King Ahaz to trust in God and stay calm, and all will be well.

Isaiah believes that Ahaz can only lose his throne if God wills it. He believes that the alliance of Syria with the Northern Kingdom of Israel against Judah will fail. But Ahaz is afraid. He has no faith in the prophet or the God the prophet proclaims, and turns to what he feels is a more certain way of securing his throne, an alliance with Assyria. Isaiah responds by withdrawing from society. He forms a little community to be the faithful remnant, and awaits the fulfilment of God's purpose in history.

In 715 B.C. Hezekiah, a reformer, comes to the throne of Judah. But when he too seeks to secure his throne by an alliance with Assyria, Isaiah comes out of retirement and condemns such action calling it a covenant with death. His recurring refrain is, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15)

Isaiah was convinced that Judah's only hope, her only true security, lay in being utterly dependent upon God, by which he meant that they were to do God's will and walk in God's way.

In 701 B.C. the Assyrian army took 46 fortified Jewish towns and cities and besieged Jerusalem itself. Isaiah continues to insist on no surrender, no alliances, trust only in God and all will be well.

Jerusalem did not fall. The Assyrians eventually withdrew.

### C) THE WILL OF GOD TODAY

For Isaiah it was all too clear there could only be one Boss, the almighty God, the Lord of History, Lord of all nations, Lord of his life. There could be no other.

Has such a message any relevance for us? Does the fact that we live in an age when being independent of all authority figures, whether they be parents, teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, policemen, clergy, either male or female, seems to be the number one priority, mean that the concept of a divine being who rules over all no longer has a place in our

thinking? Has God become just another artifact from the past to be discarded because the concept no longer suits our purpose?

And yet, I for one cannot bring myself to discard that concept or the hymns that remind us of this relationship. Take our opening hymn this morning:

“Praise my soul the king of Heaven  
To His feet they tribute bring...”

Tribute is what one offers to the one who is Lord, the Boss of one’s nation, the Boss of one’s life.

Then we have the children’s hymn:

“He’s got the whole world in his hands  
He’s got the wind and the rain in his hands  
He’s got the sun and the moon in his hands  
He’s got everybody in his hands.”

Nothing could be clearer than that. If all things are in God’s hands, then God controls all things and everybody.

Then there is the old favourite:

“Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee,”

and

“O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end.”

They are great old hymns, the sentiments of which Isaiah would have applauded with all his heart. But how seriously do we take such words and such sentiments? Are they truly a reflection of our lives? While they may still express where we are, I suspect they do not reflect where the majority of our community and nation is.

The Christian community is rapidly becoming a minority group in Canada. However that reality does not deny the reality expressed by Isaiah that the God he worshipped and the God we worship is the Lord of History, the Supreme Boss of all things. However, this belief does not justify male domination in any relationship, whether in the family, in one’s work or in the Church. God created us, male and female, to be partners with Him in the care of creation. It also means that we who believe in such a God are called to live our lives accordingly. That is, to live out of that understanding in the midst of a world that has a different point of view. To do this requires a strong faith built on a solid foundation. At times it will require us to make tough decisions, sometimes in opposition to the majority with whom we must live. There may be

times when we feel called to stand alone. Where do we stand on Sunday shopping? Do we allow our children to become involved in activities that prevent them from attending Sunday school or church worship? Would we take the same attitude to activities that might interfere with their attendance at High School or Elementary School? How do we set our time priorities, our spending priorities?

It is vitally important that we have a clear understanding of what it is our God, the Lord of History, the Lord of Life, the One we have promised to serve, expects of us.

We could argue that Isaiah lived in a different age, which is true. Judah was supposed to be a religious nation bound together with God through a covenant Moses had made with God many years before. But they had broken that covenant. They had chosen to follow a different route. Isaiah's situation was not so different from our own. There was a day when Canada was understood to be a Christian nation, in fact some may still think that is true. Just as I am sure there were those in Isaiah's time who felt Judah was still faithful to God.

Isaiah, reflecting on the events of his day, saw things differently. He had been called by the living God to call the people back to the Covenant. We too live in a day when our leaders do not see themselves as committed primarily to God and God's will as it has been revealed to us in Jesus the Christ. They have other priorities, other loyalties. Nevertheless, as a nation, along with all other nations we live under the Lordship of the One God. Isaiah's analysis and message are still relevant.

It is for this reason that the Church feels called by God to speak out against alliances, policies and practices which are seen to be in opposition to the teaching of Jesus:

- This is why the Church feels called by God to speak out against trade policies which seek to ensure that we grow richer at the expense of developing nations.
- This is why the Church feels called upon to speak out against immigration policies and practices that are seen to be unjust in the light of the fact that we have been called to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.
- This is why the Church supports the claims of aboriginal people in Canada and around the world who seek the right to control land and resources that are rightfully theirs.
- This is why the Church urged a boycott of South African goods and continues to urge a faster movement towards representative government in South Africa.

The voice of the Church may not be listened to as much as it once was. We may become a minority in our society. But this makes it even more imperative that we discover what God's will is for us in our time. We do have choices. We don't have to shop on Sunday. We don't have to buy goods from countries where there is injustice and the abuse of basic human rights. We can choose to press for Canadian policies that are just and equitable for all.

Of course there could be a price to be paid. I remember at the time of the Viet Nam war the British Prime Minister condemned the bombing of the de-militarized zone in Viet Name. Within 24 hours Britain was faced with a financial crisis as the pound dropped through the floor. Was it just a coincidence?

While we were in Sudbury a local anti-pollution group spoke out about the need to cut SO<sub>2</sub> emissions drastically. Inco quickly made it abundantly clear that they were not prepared to pay for such a reduction and they would consider closing down their operation. There was concern at the time of the free-trade negotiations regarding our social programs. We were assured they would not be affected. But the erosion has already begun. Is it just the financial squeeze? A change in economic priorities? Political pressure from certain interest groups? Are such reductions the wish of ordinary Canadians?

To trust only in God for our defense is not such a ridiculous notion when we realize that our frontiers are indefensible with the armed forces we have at our disposal, or could ever hope to muster if we could afford to pay for them.

To trust in God for our economic security is not to fold our hands in prayer and wait for God to act. It is to use our God-given resources, both in material and in people, constructively, and in such a way that the benefits will be shared fairly by all.

Isaiah was concerned with the will of God, not with insuring a high standard of living for a few. It is God's will that all His children should be able to achieve their full potential and enjoy a full life. Social, political and economic injustice can have no place in God's world. Neither is there a place for power struggles between competing bosses. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is THE AUTHORITY, and this God calls us to be His servant people, following a servant Lord.

## CONCLUSION

But in reality, where do we place God in the scheme of things? From whom do we take our marching orders – our spouse, our children, our employer, the government, a political party? Who or what determines the way we live our lives? Who or what determines what we think, or what we do, what positions to support on the issues of our society, our nation and our world? Who is the “fiddler on the roof” in our life? What is our response to the call of God?

Isaiah said, “Here am I, send me.” What do we say?



## **BEHOLD YOUR GOD**

(IV) As Heard by 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah

TEXT:

*“Cry to the cities of Judah, your God is here.”*

2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah 40:9

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Christmas music is in the air. Preparations for family and congregational celebrations are well under way. The sights and sounds of Christmas to come remind us that we are possessors of Good News of a great joy that is for all people. There’s a song that puts it this way,

“We’ve got good news; Christ the Lord will soon be found here  
We’ve got good news; let’s help spread the news around here  
If I had a drum, I’d drum it; a mandolin, I’d strum it; a humming bird, I’d hum it  
Everywhere.”

The Good News of great joy can so easily be lost sight of when we have to deal with the nitty-gritty of everyday life with its economic doom and gloom. Radio, TV and newspapers give us little good news on a daily basis. We may even wonder where our God is in all of this.

As we go about our preparations for Christmas what is the message we will be communicating? As the community watches us, as the world watches the people of God preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ, the word made flesh, what will they hear? What will they see?

Across the centuries comes the voice of the prophet Isaiah (2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah because of his date of 540 BC, 160 years after 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah):

“Behold your God  
Behold, the Lord comes with might and his arm rules for him;  
Behold his reward is with him and his recompense before him.”

The original hearers of these words were members of a nation whose leading citizens had been in captivity in Babylon for sixty years. Despite all attempts to integrate them, they had maintained their distinctive identity in that foreign land.

Those who had not been exiled had mingled more freely with the non-Jewish settlers who had been brought in. Now, with the possibility of the return of the exiles, the prophet calls the people back to their mission as the people of God.

#### A) BEHOLD YOUR GOD

The prophet first catches the attention of his hearers: "Behold your God."

The prophet could point to the decision of Cyrus, King of Persia, now also the ruler of Babylon, to let the Israelites go. Isaiah saw this as an act of God. God had acted to save his people.

As we mingle with our fellow citizens at work, on the streets, in the shopping centre, at the curling club, or on the ski slopes, are we able to say, "See, there is our God!"? We are not accustomed to thinking that way, let alone speaking that way. Is it because we are not convinced that God is involved in the daily events of our life, or the events of our nation's life? Have we limited God's involvement, God's authority to the spiritual realm?

The prophet saw the hand of God in the events of everyday life. As he watched the rise of Cyrus, he saw him to be a servant of God, even though he was not of the Jewish faith. When Cyrus defeated the Babylonians, the prophet saw this as the hand of God. He firmly believed in a God who controlled history, a God whom humanity could not control.

But we never cease trying to reduce God to an entity we can handle. A little boy asked his mother where God was. She told him that God is everywhere. But such a general answer did not satisfy him.

"Is He in this city?" the boy asked. "Yes," his mother replied.

"Is He in this house?" the boy asked. "Yes," his mother replied.

"Is He in this room?" the boy asked. "Yes," his mother replied, becoming a little annoyed by such persistent questioning, "He's everywhere."

"Is He in this glass?" the boy asked.

"Of course, haven't I been telling you that He's everywhere?" – at which the boy put his hand over the mouth of the glass and announced, "I've got Him."

When Isaiah said, "Behold your God," he did not mean that he could see the form of God. The Old Testament teaching was that anyone who literally looked upon God would die. At the same time they believed that you could see the activity of God in the world.



The New Testament puts it this way, “No-one has ever seen God; the only son who is in the bosom of the father, he has made him known.” While Jesus himself said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” This we too believe. God is present in the world. God has made himself known to us in Jesus the Christ. God came and lived among us. God is with us today. But who can say, “See, God is here” or “God is there”?

To be able to see God in history, to be able to see God in life, requires that we have eyes of faith. The obstetrician who sees the hand of God in the birth of every baby is able to do so because of his or her “eyes of faith”. The artist who sees God in a sunset he or she tries to capture on canvas does so because of their “eyes of faith”. The mother who senses the presence of God as her child’s fever breaks in the early hours of the morning, is able to do so because of her “eyes of faith”. The young parents who, even in the death of their child, are aware of the presence of God who shares their sorrow, have that awareness because of their “eyes of faith”.

Victor Frankl, survivor of a Nazi concentration camp writes, “Another time we were working in a trench. The dawn was gray around us, gray was the sky above, gray was the snow in the pale light of dawn, gray the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and gray their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, and perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere, I heard a victorious YES, in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable gray of a dawning morning in Bavaria. And the light shineth in the darkness.”

For the person of faith, for those with “eyes of faith”, God can be seen. We too can say, “There in that moment, in that experience, I saw God.”

## B) THE COMMISSION

But does that make any real difference? Where does such an understanding of God in life lead us?

Isaiah believed that Israel had been entrusted with the responsibility of proclaiming to the whole world, the Good News of God’s presence. They were called to be “Heralds of glad tidings”. To have seen God actively involved in guiding the destiny of nations was good news that needed to be shared. The herald of the ancient world first blew the trumpet, and then in the loudest possible voice made his proclamation. The trumpet blast was to get the people’s attention, “Get you up to a high mountain, lift up your voice with strength.” The herald took his stand on the highest point of land so all could see and hear.

For some who heard it was the fulfillment of their dream of a restored city of Jerusalem, a Temple re-built, a nation restored to its former power and glory. While such activities might proclaim the power of Israel's God, would it really reveal the living presence of God? That was their mission – to point to God's living presence and concern for the whole world.

But there were few who, hearing the words of Isaiah, were prepared to stand with him. For his message from God was not one they wanted to hear. Isaiah declared that though they may never again achieve a place of significance and power among the nations, their God was with them. All that was required of them was that they be able to point to the living presence of God. Isaiah says, "All mankind is grass, they last no longer than a flower in the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon them; the grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God endures for evermore." (Isaiah 40:7-8)

We need to listen to this word of the Prophet, at least I do. Otherwise it is all too easy to become discouraged in our struggle to be the Body of Christ, Christ's hands and feet, and to really make a difference in our society.

Few see the Christian Faith as a top priority. Our time, talents and resources are not focused primarily on the mission God in Christ has entrusted us with. Our spending priorities, both personally and nationally, are out of sync with the faith we have been called to proclaim – so much on ourselves, so little for others. Yet we have been called to be heralds of God's Good News!

We have been called to be to bang our drum, clang our cymbal, blow our trumpet, do whatever is necessary to get the world's attention. Having got the world's attention, we are to declare unequivocally, in deed as well as word, that our God has come, our God is involved, our God is at work all around us. Behold our God!

Buildings in good repair can be important signs that there is a people who care about maintaining a place to worship God. But it is all too easy to then assume that such a symbol is all that is necessary to produce faith and draw the faithful together so that the kingdom will come. It is possible to live within the sign and sound of church buildings and never realize that what those buildings represent has eternal significance for every human being.

The Good News of God's love and care can be proclaimed within these walls every Sunday, but most of the population will not hear it, unless there are heralds who go forth to share it. To have experienced the hand of God upon your life, to have seen the hand of God in history, is Good news.

A congregation in East Harlem parades through their neighbourhood every Easter morning before dawn, singing hymns concerning the death of Christ. At dawn they arrive at a vacant lot on which a rock has been set up as a symbol of the tomb. Then the Easter story is re-enacted and the congregation returns to the sanctuary, singing hymns of resurrection.

St Luke's in Toronto sets up a soapbox in Allen gardens. The Church of our Saviour in Washington, DC operates a coffee house, the Potter's House, where members of that little congregation meet with those who drop in, and through conversation, offerings of music and topical discussions, seek to be God's presence in that place.

How do we let the community know that our God is alive and well, and that our God cares for all people?

### C) THE WILL OF GOD TODAY

In Isaiah's day the Good News was to be declared first to the cities of Judah. This was also the way that Jesus understood his mission. He was sent first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is the most difficult form of missionary activity.

It is easier to see missionary activity as something that happens overseas. For years we have contributed to sending others to other countries. But the real mission field today is in our own community our own neighbourhood. This is the most neglected area, despite the fact that we know the Christian faith is never more than one generation away from extinction.

The prophet spoke of a God who tends the flock like a shepherd, and gathers them together with his arms; he will carry the lambs in his bosom and lead ewes to water. We too proclaim a God who loves all people unconditionally. But how do people experience the love and care of such a God? If we are the body of Christ, if we are the hands and feet of Christ, it can only be as we love and care for those around us, especially those who are not already in the fold, and those who have dropped out of the fold, that God's love and care will be experienced.

God needs men and women, boys and girls, through whom His caring can be expressed. We need to reach out to the two hundred plus families who are under our pastoral care but who, for whatever reason, have chosen to drop out of active involvement in the life and work of this congregation. We need to continue to expand our reaching out to those who are shut in; they need to know that we care.

Training for such visiting is available. There is a need to recognize the importance of this reaching out. It needs to be a priority in busy schedules. Coffee parties are a way of getting to know one another and drawing our families together. If we are unable to communicate God's love and care to those under our pastoral care, that is, those who have or have had a relationship with Christ and his Church, how can we ever hope to reach out to those who have no Christian background?

Many of you are already deeply involved in a variety of community organisations. There you can work towards improving the quality of life in the community, improving the education of all children, ensuring the safety of our streets, improving housing conditions for low income

families, expressing through word and deed the Christian concern for justice and righteousness in the land.

As we face the issues of our day, the issues that divide the church, and the issues that divide the community, we need to ask ourselves: is this where God is? In what way is God involved in these issues? When we are involved in discussions around the issues, whether it be free trade, the new national immigration policies, environmental issues or feeding the hungry, we need to be asking: How is God active in these issues? Or do we believe our God only meets us in the personal crises of life? Is our God confined to temples made by human hands? Is God honoured solely by the singing of hymns and the saying of prayers? Or were the prophets of old correct? Our God requires a people dedicated to bearing witness through deed as well as word to His unconditional love, God's justice and mercy.

### CONCLUSION

Advent, we have said, is a time of preparation. As the prophet reminds us, "Prepare a road for the Lord through the wilderness, clear a highway across the desert for our God." (Isaiah 40:3) We are here to prepare for the coming of the God who came in Jesus of Nazareth, the One who is within us, our Lord Emmanuel. That is good news for all people  
Advent is a reminder of that.

"We've got good news, Christ the Lord will soon be found here.  
We've got good news, let's help spread the news around here."

For we too can declare,

"Behold your God.  
For we too have beheld his glory,  
such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

For we too have experienced the depth, the height and the breadth of God's unconditional love.

## **THE VOICE OF PROPHECY**

(V) Love Unlimited.

### **TEXT:**

*"The Lord said to me,  
Go again and love a woman, loved by another man,  
An adulteress, and love her as I, the Lord, love the Israelites  
Although they resort to other gods and love the raisin cakes  
Offered to their idols."*

Hosea 3:0

### **INTRODUCTION**

Harry was in love. The problem, at least the way his friends saw it, was that the girl Harry had fallen in love with had a reputation for promiscuity. Harry's family and friends were shocked when despite all their protests, Harry married the girl. Harry and Gerty had three children. Then one day, when Harry returned home from work, Gerty was gone.

After a few days Harry went looking for her. Eventually he found her in the red light district working for one of the local pimps. What should he do? Seek a legal separation? Begin divorce proceedings immediately? The problem was Harry still loved her. He couldn't just walk away and leave her. So he paid off the pimp and took her home.

You say, "What a fool! Nobody but a fool would do such a thing." Is there then no such thing as unlimited, unconditional love?

For most of us love has its limits. We believe that there is only so much hurt that we can absorb. Sexual infidelity destroys a marriage relationship faster than anything else. For most it is an unforgivable sin. The fact that for most of us love has its limits affects our relationship with our children as well as our spouse. When a child persists in doing the very things they know will hurt their parents the most, even the most loving parent can be tempted to turn away.

None of us likes being used. Being a doormat for others is not very popular. As Christians we have difficulty exercising a love that is unlimited, when there is no assurance that the one so loved will behave the way we think he or she ought to.

Hosea, a man who lived in the mid-700s B.C. found the strength to do this very thing. He was a man for whom his life experience revealed a truth about God, a truth which lies at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hosea writes:

“The Lord said to me,  
Go again and love a woman loved by another man, an adulteress,  
And love her as I, the Lord, love the Israelites although they resort  
to other gods and love the raisin cakes offered to their idols.”

(Hosea 3:1)

#### A) THE MAN AND HIS TIMES

Hosea was a citizen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He tells us nothing about his home town or how he earned his living. His prophetic ministry followed that of Amos and paralleled Isaiah's. It was a period in which many of the disasters foretold by Amos took place. His life experiences had taught Hosea how to endure great stress without buckling. He was a man of complex feelings, a mixture of tenderness and indignation, love and hate, lenience and severity, hope for the future and absolute despair.

He was thus a man in conflict, so emotional he often came close to losing control. At the same time, the depth of his affection, his gentleness and passion, his unconditional love for Gomer, all point to a uniqueness.

He was the opposite of Amos. Amos, you remember, was the austere moralist, upholder of the law. He saw God as the judge, executing his righteous judgement on the people. Hosea was a man of religious affection. He saw God as the One who loves His people so much that He grieves over their sinful ways.

Hosea lived in troubled times. Israel, politically, was unstable. Kings were being assassinated in quick succession. Assyria, their powerful neighbour, was continually interfering in their internal affairs. Hosea believed this was due to Israel's prosperity, and the leaders' desire to maintain at all cost the growth of wealth in the hands of the few. He believed this attitude would eventually lead to Israel's destruction.

The people had turned their backs on the one true God, the God who had led them out of Egypt, the God who had guided them through the desert wanderings, the God who had enabled them to establish themselves in the land of Canaan. In this new land they were faced with having to live a different lifestyle. They were now required to be farmers and merchants. The skills for these new occupations had to be learned from the local Canaanites. The problem was, how could a desert God know anything about farming and merchandizing? Surely these new occupations required different gods if they were to be successful? So they looked to the gods of the Canaanites. As they prospered they gave thanks to the Canaanite gods, the nature and fertility gods whose shrines were all around them.

The prophet Hosea received no vision. He saw no bright lights, nor did he meet with any heavenly messenger. He believed that God spoke to him through his relationship with Gomer.

## B) HIS MESSAGE

Hosea's message, his living word from God, comes out of his marriage experience. The story is simple. Hosea feels called to marry Gomer who may even then have been a Temple prostitute. Some authorities believe that the mention of her wantonness was simply indicating the potential for promiscuity.

Gomer bore three children. Each one was given a symbolic name. The first born was named Jezreel, a reminder to the people of the place where Jehu had carried out his terrible blood purge. (2 Kings 10:11) This son was to be a sign that God would punish His people for this terrible atrocity. The second child, a daughter, was called Lo-ruhamah, which meant "Not Pitied". This child was to symbolize the fact that God's patience was at an end. The third child, a son, was called Lo-ammi, which meant "Not My People". This child was to symbolize the fact that God has dissolved the covenant with Israel.

Some authorities have added to the sordidness of the story by suggesting that only the first-born was fathered by Hosea, the others by other lovers. By Jewish law Gomer deserved to be stoned to death. But Hosea cannot give her up. He not only forgives her but takes her home, having paid for her release from her Temple servitude.

Suddenly the light of truth dawns on Hosea. His life with Gomer is a reflection of God's life with Israel. His marriage covenant is a reflection of the religious covenant God has made with Israel at Sinai. As Gomer has been unfaithful to him from the beginning, so Israel has been unfaithful to God from the beginning. As they wandered in the desert they had longed for the flesh pots of Egypt. When Moses climbed Sinai to receive the Law, Israel made a golden calf and worshipped it. Faced with giants in the land of Canaan, they lost their faith in God, refusing to enter the Promised Land, and were forced to continue their wanderings in the wilderness.

Hosea now sees clearly that all Israel's troubles are the outward signs of their infidelity. God is not Number One. Hosea saw immorality, political confusion, corruption in high places, religious formalism, as signs that his fellow citizens were placing their trust in the wrong things.

He saw clearly that kings had taken the place of God, claiming authority over the people and total allegiance from the people. He saw that dependence upon God had been replaced by dependence on military and political alliances. He saw his people depending for their security upon arms and fortifications, rather than on God. He saw the worship of the One True God being replaced by the worship of a variety of idols. He saw those who still worshipped the God of Abraham and Isaac doing so to secure for themselves harmony, security, prosperity and peace of mind. For Hosea this too was idolatrous. Of Israel, Hosea wrote, "her love was like a transient cloud or like dew which evaporates under the heat of the sun." (Hosea 13:3) And so Hosea, on behalf of God, says, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6)

Hosea's claim is that Israel did not know God. That is, she was not enjoying an intimate relationship with God. The fact of having entered into a covenant relationship with God did not ensure intimacy with God. We know this to be true of human relationships. Two people can be married according to the law, they may have read all the marriage manuals and have attended marriage courses and think they know all there is to know, but they may still not enjoy an intimate marriage. Why? Because they choose to play games with each other, making sure that they keep each other at arms' length.

Israel kept God at arms' length. They gave Him lip service but not life service. Are we any different? Do we know God intimately?

Hosea says, "The spirit of harlotry is within them and they know not the Lord." Therefore the covenant was broken. While this was a crisis in the life of Israel it was, as Hosea saw it, also an opportunity, as every crisis is. Israel could, if she so chose, renew the covenant.

For Hosea, the anger of God was redemptive. The crises of their life – political turmoil, immorality, corruption in high places, and the general decadence – those things which shake the very foundation of human self-sufficiency are, in fact, evidence of God working to free the people from their enslavement to false loyalties, and providing them with an opportunity to re-enter the freedom of the covenant.

As Hosea reflects on his own love for Gomer and his inability to let her go, he sees the steadfast love of God for Israel:

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
My heart recoils within me  
My compassion grows warm and tender  
I will not execute my fierce anger." (Hosea 11:8-9)

However, redemption is not without discipline. Gomer must be placed in isolation for a while. There must be a time of withdrawal before a rehabilitation. This will be true for Israel. She will lose her independence for a while. She will lose her political and economic freedom. She will go into exile. In exile, as she is forced to serve another people, she will have the opportunity to rediscover the true value of life and learn what it means to depend solely on God once again. It can be a time when she will lose her taste for infidelity, and God's love can redeem His people.

### C) HOSEA'S MESSAGE FOR TODAY

As I reflect upon this ancient story it reminds me of the struggle we all go through as we develop from childhood through adolescence to mature adulthood.



In childhood parents are God-like creature who seek to set the limits on our activities. But we soon discover that God has created us free beings with a mind and a will of our own. So we struggle with what we want and the limits that others try to impose upon us. We seek to please our limit setters when we want something from them. Israel was faithful to God when it suited her purpose, which was usually when she was in trouble.

When England stood alone, the Nazi hoards poised to invade, the churches of England were packed. It has never been the same since. Here in Canada we experienced a boom in church attendance and church building in the fifties and sixties. Families were flocking to the cities and the suburbs. They came from communities in which the church had had a central place. This was a time when our Church was predominantly a rural church. What happened?

Like Israel before us, did we begin to question whether the God who had cared for us in a predominantly agricultural society could be equally successful in an industrial society? Have the 70% of Canadians who no longer attend church on a regular basis turned to other gods who are thought to be more successful in an age of computers, high finance and international corporations?

What or whom do we seek? Is it harmony within ourselves and with others, peace of mind, prosperity? Do we see the Church, the community of Faith existing solely to make us feel good? What do we focus our lives on – ourselves, our work, our family? Happiness, success, personal security? To centre one's life on any of these is surely a form of idolatry. When the going gets rough and tough, when excessive demands are made on our time, our energies and our pocket book, when health suffers and relationships turn sour, to whom do we turn? Is the God revealed in Jesus our Christ the last resort after we have consulted doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, and have failed to find the wholeness of life we seek?

The prophet Hosea raises serious questions not only about the religious life of his day but also our day. For many, the Christian faith has nothing to say about industry, commerce, economics, politics, society's morals or an individual's lifestyle. Some would also say it ought not to have anything to say. In other words, for them the Christian Faith is completely irrelevant to life. In fact, for many who still call themselves Christian, that fact makes not an iota of difference to the way they live their lives at home, at work or in the community.

Racial and religious prejudice is growing. Physical and sexual abuse has reached epidemic proportions. Crimes of violence are on the increase. The bread lines are getting longer. We like to think it is a minority of the population that is responsible for the problems in our society. But I suspect the reality is that more and more are worshipping the gods of commerce, politics, pleasure and personal survival, gods which are little different from the gods of the ancient Canaanites.

Hosea reminds us that such gods, in the long run, do not deliver. They cannot meet our deepest human needs. There is then a need to rediscover our faith roots. There is a need to rediscover

the true value of life. There is a need to rediscover what it means to live life solely dependent upon the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

There is a story told of a man in a small Oklahoma community who was the town drunk. He was converted at a revival meeting and was baptized by immersion in a nearby creek. As he was going down in to the water the preacher noticed a bulge in his hip pocket. "What's in your pocket?" the preacher asked. "Oh, that's my wallet," came the reply. The preacher, somewhat relieved, asked, "But you don't want to get your wallet all wet, do you?" And the answer came, "Parson, when I get baptized, my wallet gets baptized with me."

For how many of us is that true? We can be committed to Christ in our heads, but not in our hands and feet. We can be committed to Christ in our hands but not our head and feet. We can be committed to Christ in our feet but not our head or our hands. Total commitment is head, hands and feet. Body, mind and spirit. Time, talent and money. Impossible, we say. But that is God's wish as God loves all people with an unlimited love.

### CONCLUSION

And so God still waits, as a parent waits with bated breath for their toddler to take their first step, for the adolescent to become a mature adult.

We believe in a God who loves us unconditionally, a God who gives us the freedom to go on our own way if we so choose, even to the bitter end. We believe in a God who has declared that love, in and through Jesus our Christ, and who is waiting to welcome each and every individual into his family, fulfilling each and every need.

As we face the reality of the world in which we live with all its turmoil, brokenness and hurt, as we face the reality of Church life, shrinking membership, the financial squeeze at all levels of the church and community, are these signs and symptoms of a much deeper problem? Are more and more of our fellow citizens choosing to serve other gods? Hosea was sure in his day that his people had done just that, but he was sure that God's love was unfailing.

So God awaits a people who will allow the redeeming power of his spirit, his unlimited love, to enter their lives and mould them and make them after His will so that God's unconditional love may flow through them to a needy world.

## **THE VOICE OF GOD**

(VI) As Heard By Micah.

### **TEXT:**

*"On that day, says the Lord,  
I will gather those who are lost I will assemble the exiles  
and I will strengthen the weaklings; I will preserve the lost  
as a remnant and turn the derelict into a mighty nation."*

Micah 4:6

### **INTRODUCTION**

Who are we? Why do we exist? What is our reason for being? These are the age-old religious questions.

Are we simply mechanical toys, created by God, set in motion by God, but left to run our course with no direction and no purpose?

Are we simply pieces on a divine chess board, to be moved about by divine whim with neither rhyme nor reason?

Does God intend us to simply go with the flow of the prevailing current? Are we simply an afterthought of creation to be blown in every direction by a constantly changing wind? The Old Testament prophets believed that God has specific expectations for the creatures he had created. As people lived up to those expectations so they prospered. When people failed to live up to those expectations God punished them with a variety of misfortunes.

Prophets such as Amos, whom we looked at two weeks ago, were in the main prophets of doom and gloom. Amos saw little hope for his nation, Israel.

Micah who lived some years later, while still seeing the real possibility of destruction for the nation of Judah, Israel already having been wiped out of existence, nevertheless sees a ray of hope. He hears God say, "I will gather those who are lost, I will assemble the exiles and I will strengthen the weaklings, I will preserve the lost as a remnant and turn the derelict into a mighty nation." (Micah 4:6)

Micah was a rural prophet who lived in the little town of Moresheth which has changed little since his day. It is located in the foothills, the border country between Judah and Philistia. It was a good farming area, though in the main the farmers were tenant farmers, the owners of

the land living in Jerusalem a day's journey away. Its main disadvantage was that it was the gateway for any invasion of Judah from the south and west. Moresheth was only twenty miles from Tekoa, the home of Amos, and the prophecies of Amos undoubtedly had some influence on Micah.

Micah the prophet was also a social reformer. His contact with the tenant farmers led him to side with them against their oppressive landlords. He believed that God was vitally concerned with and involved in the problems of the people. Micah had little time for those who, while claiming to be religious, were unjust, even merciless in their dealings with others.

Micah was also conscious of the international scene. Assyria having overpowered Syria in 732 AD and Israel in 725 AD, he was well aware that only Judah stood between Assyria and Egypt. It was only a matter of time. Therefore Judah needed to move very cautiously. She must set her own house in order. The internal rot must be stopped. So he spoke out against the internal injustices he could see.

In Chapter Two he condemns in no uncertain terms those who spent their nights planning how to take away a man's livelihood and then, the next day, turning him off his land and out of his home. We are reminded of the increasing number of farms and homes and businesses being repossessed and the eviction of those who can no longer pay exorbitant rents. We are reminded of mega-projects in a variety of countries which involve the forced removal of peasants from their land with no compensation. We are reminded of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, and the loss of all their property with no compensation until very recently.

In Chapter Three Micah criticizes the prophets and the priests who say only those things that will please those who pay their salaries. Micah's courage and bravery sprang from a real spiritual insight and vision of the living God in history.

At this, the mid-point of our Advent season, let us listen to Micah's message of hope.

#### A) THE COMING OF PEACE

Micah expresses a hope shared by us all, for a world at peace: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning knives; nation shall not lift sword against nation, nor ever again be trained for war; and each man shall dwell under his own vine, under his own fig tree, undisturbed." (Micah 4:3-4)

Micah sees the day coming when all nations will recognize the supremacy of the one God, all nations will want to not only learn the ways of God but to walk in those ways. National boundaries will be abolished. Armies will be unnecessary. Every family will have their own plot of land which will provide for all their needs. All will live at peace with one another.

An impossible dream! Yet is not this still the dream of the majority, no matter where they live? Without such a dream the future would indeed be nothing but darkness and despair. For without hope there is no reason for living.

Jesus, at his birth, was proclaimed to be the one who was destined to bring peace. This is what Christmas is all about, "peace on earth, good will to men." Of this we can be certain. What God wants for the world is that all his children should live in peace. The vision of Micah is what God wants for us. But Micah says it can only come when all nations recognize and accept the authority of the One God. Is that vision any closer to becoming a reality today than it was in Micah's day?

Religion has been used far too often to further the purposes of people. It has been used to gain economic and political power. The real issue in Northern Ireland is not conflict between two so-called opposite views of Christianity, but the quest for political and economic power. The same is true in Lebanon. The same is true to a large extent of the Arab/Israeli conflict.

The biblical issues of justice and equality, co-operation and peace, strike at the very heart of western political and economic life. We see this most clearly in other countries such as Korea, the Philippines, Latin America, developing countries supported by Western nations, but countries in which human rights are being trampled on daily. Any movement by working people for justice and equality is called a threat to national security and is put down with a heavy hand.

The mega-projects in these lands, whether they be agriculture or industry, are controlled by international corporations based largely in North America and Europe. Nothing is allowed to interfere with the profitable operations of these corporations.

True they do provide some jobs for a few people at very low wages, but they also cause many more thousands, who were once self-sufficient, to become indigent.

The uneasy peace we have experienced for the last forty-five years has been maintained by the threat of the nuclear deterrent. The resulting cold war, as it has been called, has been fed with the concept of the Christian West pitted against an anti-theistic Communism which had to be combatted in Korea and Vietnam, and battle preparedness maintained in Europe.

But with the major changes taking place in Europe the cold war has vanished and with it the reason for great expenditures on arms. The result – recession at least in North America which has depended heavily on the massive spending this has entailed.

How does one convince voters that higher taxes, the reorganisation of our industrial life and agricultural life is essential for survival when we no longer have an enemy out there? Or is Iraq to be the new enemy? Will the threat of a fanatical Islam take the place of fanatical Communism as The Threat to the Christian West?

For some years there has been pressure to modernize our armed forces. But Canadian taxpayers were not willing to see such a large portion of their taxes be used in this way in a time of peace. But when faced with Iraq aggression there was money available to modernize our navy and send part of our air force to the Middle East. Where will the extra money be found? By cutting funds allocated to social programs, an action long overdue according to some economists, rather than from taxing the windfall profits of the oil companies who are benefitting by the jump in oil prices?

Five years ago Robert Coates, the then Defence Minister, told MacLean's Magazine that the best way to increase the number of jobs was the development of our armaments industry, which he was doing. It would be interesting to know whom we supplied and with what?

When I remember the thousands who live in refugee camps around the world, the millions who are hungry, the street children in Brazil, the fighting that is going on in so many parts of the world, how I long for the day of peace, a day when the world's resources can be used to improve the living conditions of two-thirds of God's children.

While I cannot bring myself to believe that there exists a person in the universe who wields power equally but in opposition to God, nevertheless there are times when there seems to be some Satanic force at work, interfering with the activities of those who would bring peace to the world.

But the dream persists, despite the setbacks. Micah believed that some day peace would come. It was one of the reasons for Christ's coming. It is still the hope of many today.

But I suspect Micah was right when he proclaimed that this peace can only come when all nation acknowledge the lordship of the one God. The Jews called this God "Yahweh", the Moslems call this God "Allah", Hindus use the term "Nirvana" and Buddhists speak of "the Enlightened One". Just as the knowledge of the One God is common to all nations, so the longing for a world at peace is common to all.

## B) A NEW RULER

But how will the nations be brought under the leadership of One God? Micah sees the need for a new type of leadership. He hears God say, "But you Bethlehem, in Ephrathah, small as you are to be among Judah's clans, out of you shall come forth a governor for Israel, one whose roots are far back in the past, in days gone by." (Micah 5:2)

"He shall appear to be their shepherd in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall continue, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; and he shall be a man of peace." (Micah 5:4)

In these words of Micah we can see a reflection of the prophecy of Isaiah who was Micah's contemporary. Isaiah had spoken of a young woman who would conceive and bear a son and, before he would be old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, the enemies of Judah would be defeated. This child was to be called Emmanuel, a sign that God was still present with his people.

Micah suggests that this person will be born in Bethlehem and be of the House of David. For the Jews, this was understood as the promise of the Messiah, that special messenger from God who would restore the kingdom of Israel to its former greatness, the greatness they had known under David and Solomon.

Christians have understood these words to have been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, and have proclaimed him to be the one to whom every knee should bow and every tongue confess him to be Lord.

While Micah recognizes the insignificance of Bethlehem as an important fact in the story, it was anything but the power centre of Judah, he makes nothing of it. Christians, on the other hand, following the death of Jesus, which caused a re-thinking of the meaning of Messiah, saw Bethlehem's insignificance as fitting into the pattern of how God acts.

The biblical story over and over again stresses the fact that God choose the weak, the powerless, the humble, to do His will, rather than the strong and the powerful. Abraham was a nobody until God called him. Moses was a man with a price on his head, a stutterer. Samuel was a caretaker in the Temple. David was a shepherd boy. Jesus was born in a stable, son of Mary whose husband Joseph at first refused to accept any responsibility. Jesus was not the sort of person the world understands as a powerful leaders.

Who was Jesus in comparison to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony, Napoleon, George Washington, Montgomery, McArthur or a Churchill? These were men who understood power. They knew how to build empires, how to control the minds and hearts of people. We have trouble with leaders like Jesus. What can they do against the might of Rome, Nazi Germany, Communism, or the aggression of Iraq, or religious fanaticism, except die? And yet God seems to be saying, through his prophets, that the only way to world peace is to walk in the Christ way and depend on God and God alone.

### C) THE GOODNESS OF GOD

The book of Micah concludes with a simple statement of faith. He says, "Who is a God like thee? Thou takest away guilt, thou passest over the sin of the remnant of thy own people, thou dost not let thy anger rage for ever but delightest in love that will not change. Once more thou wilt show us tender affection and wash out our guilt casting all our sins into the depths. Of the sea."

We must hear this statement of faith against the backdrop of the destruction of Israel and the imminent end of Judah. Micah, despite all that had happened and all that he fears is about to happen, cannot give up on God.

This is not unique to Micah. Other prophets and the psalmist may speak at times in anger and frustration, and confess the feeling of being deserted by God. Yet they never give up on God. The Book of Job, which is the story of one man's struggle with the tragedies of life and which can also be interpreted as the nation's struggle with tragedy puts forward all the reasons why a person should give up on God. But Job refuses to curse God.

Jesus himself wrestled with the same issue. So many people in need of help. So much criticism by the religious authorities whom he might have expected to support his mission. The failure of even those closest to him to understand the true nature of his mission. His final desertion by the twelve. Yet it was always, "Thy will not mine be done." He never gave up on God. He believed that no matter what happened, God still cared. God still loved.

Micah also believed that God's love will not change. The Bible is the story of God's reaching out to the people he created in love, and the people's reaction to that offer of love.

## CONCLUSION

Does it not amaze you? Despite all that has happened, the killing of the prophets, the killing of Jesus, the misuse of the earth and its resources, God still loves us. Despite all we have done to the world God made. Despite all we have failed to do, God still loves us. Despite all the wars which have killed so many of His children and brought religion into disrepute, God still loves us. Despite the hunger that still ravages parts of Africa, and the slums of modern cities, despite the daily injustices of men and women, God still loves us.

It amazes me.

But this is the Good News of Advent and Christmas. Though, as the prophets saw very clearly, we deserve nothing but destruction, still God loves all His children with an everlasting love and desires that all may be at home with Him in the world He has made.

God does not ask us to build costly buildings in His honour. Nor does God ask us to build costly monuments, nor costly memorials or costly shrines. Our God asks simply for lives willingly given in costly service to his needy children wherever they are.

Micah said, "God has told you what is good; and what it is that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your God." (Micah 6:8)

It was the way Jesus lived.



It will be in following such leadership that the nations of the world may come to acknowledge the Lordship of the One God, whatever the name they use, and all people will learn to live at peace, enjoying the world God created.



## **THE VOICE OF GOD**

(VII) As Heard By Mary.

### **TEXT:**

*"... the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout,  
he has brought down monarchs from their thrones  
but the humble have been lifted high.  
The hungry he has satisfied with good things,  
the rich sent empty away."*

Luke 1:51-53

### **INTRODUCTION**

What is Christmas all about really?

We decorate our homes with Christmas trees and coloured lights. Beneath each tree is a pile of neatly wrapped and labelled gifts. We sing,

*"Away in a manger, no crib for a bed.  
The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head."*

We read the Christmas story and sing,

*"O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie."*

And Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without,

*"Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright."*

Christmas, as we have come to celebrate it, oozes peace and goodwill. But is this really what God intended? Was the birth of Jesus simply God's attempt to proclaim peace and tranquility, sweetness and light?

What did God say to Mary about the mission of the son she was to give birth to and who was to be called Jesus, and be king over Israel? Mary, entrusted by God to bring the child Jesus into the world, entrusted with the responsibility of raising the child to adulthood, had a somewhat different expectation of her son. In response to her confrontation with Almighty God and her unusual pregnancy, she sang a song with E. Stanley Joes called "the most revolutionary document in the world."

The Magnificat is familiar to us all. But do we really listen to the words? Mary sang,

“... the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout  
he has brought down monarchs from their thrones,  
but the humble have been lifted high.  
The hungry he has satisfied with good things,  
the rich sent empty away.”

Have you ever pictured Mary as a revolutionary? A member of the Israeli underground, pledged to the overthrow of all oppressors? The Bethlehem stable as the birth place of a world revolution?

I too have difficulty picturing Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for that matter Jesus himself as members of the Zealots, pledged to their program of assassination and the violent overthrow of Rome and all who sympathized with her. Such a picture, such an expectation, doesn't tie in with such sayings as, “My kingdom is not of this world, if it were of this world, then would my servants fight.” Nevertheless I cannot avoid the fact that his first disciples were considered to have turned the world of their day upside down. What could be more revolutionary than that? The ancient world rulers saw this band of men and women as disturbers of the status quo. In a very real sense they were liberators of the oppressed.

Mary's song proposes a revolution on at least three fronts.

#### A) THE MORAL REVOLUTION

She sang, “The arrogant of heart and mind, he has put to rout.” Mary believed that God in Christ had rejected every human pretension. By God's coming into the world in the Christ child, our arrogance, our acquisitiveness and our pride are condemned.

Jesus spoke of a Pharisee and a Publican going into the Temple to pray. The Pharisee looked up into heaven and thanked God that he was not like other men, and especially thankful that he was not like that sinner of a publican. He went on to list his religious virtues which he believed set him apart from others. Such arrogance, such self-pride is surely the root cause of our failure to be the people God is calling us to be.

Eugene Nida, in his book *God's Word in Man's Language*, says, “Pride is idolatrous self-worship. Arrogance is its priest; greed its sacrifice; flattery is its ritual.” Human pride, human arrogance shows its face in a variety of ways. It can be seen in the counsellor whether professional or amateur, who keeps telling himself or herself that they can break the relationship with the warm and loving person they are seeking to help at any time, while becoming more and more deeply involved.

To the Sunday school teacher who concluded the lesson on the Publican and the Pharisee by saying, "Let us thank God that none of us are like the Pharisee."

It is seen in the attitude which says of the poor and hungry,  
    "If they worked as hard as I do;  
    if they used their opportunities the way I used mine;  
    if they had made wise investments the way I did,  
    they wouldn't be poor and hungry.  
    They are lazy good-for-nothings.  
    Why should I share my hard earned bread with them?"

Mary sensed that God was going to make some changes, that her son would set in motion a moral revolution, so that what the world calls "playing it safe" would be seen for what it is, selfish, greedy and uncaring.

Those whom the world calls religious, both then and now, take pride in their obedience to the law, their faithful attendance at worship and the festivals, and in the amount they give to charity, and their literal adherence to every word of Scripture. They have difficulty accepting and associating with those who do not live up to their moral standards.

Jesus was so different. As son of the living God, he saw no grounds in that relationship for thinking of himself as being better than anyone else. By his acceptance of the Baptism of John he placed himself alongside the sinners, the lost sheep of the House of Israel. As Paul reminds us, "he made himself a nothing, assuming the role of the slave."

This moral revolution, foreseen by Mary, occurs whenever and wherever Jesus is taken seriously. For when we become really involved with him, we find the need to refocus our lives. Instead of clutching to ourselves those things which we have tried to make our security blanket, we let them go, and embrace instead God's way of unconditional caring. But when that happens, a revolution takes place.

## B) A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

But Mary went even further for she sang, "He has brought down monarchs from their thrones, but the humble have been lifted high." In and through her confrontation with God she came to believe that God was about to inaugurate a social revolution. She saw the day when those who considered themselves to be powerful would find themselves without power.

At the end of his earthly life, Jesus stood before Pilate who boasted of his power to have Jesus crucified. Jesus responded by saying, "You could have no power at all against me, unless it be given to you from above." Thus Jesus faced Pilate without fear and in that moment, Pilate lost his power over Jesus. Whenever and wherever people have stood their ground for the truths Jesus lived and taught, oppressive rulers tremble because they know their end is at hand.

Herod knew that in the birth of this child there was a real threat to his power. He chose to stamp out the possibility by destroying all the children two years of age and under in the region of Bethlehem. But he failed. Oh, he killed many children, but one escaped.

Slavery was abolished in the western world because there were those who decided to put the teaching of Jesus into practice. Child labour in the mines and factories of England was eventually banned because there were Christian men and women who decided to practice their faith. Hospitals, schools and most social welfare programs in the western world are the result of Christians who decided to live their faith.

Karl Marx's Manifesto came in part from his study of the Bible. The changes in Eastern Europe are being credited in part to pressure of the Christian Community in those countries. They ceased to fear the power of the oppressor.

The Black Revolution in Africa has Christian roots. That is not to say that Christianity believes in or teaches the violent overthrow of governments. But the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly teaches that all people are equal. All were made in the image of God. We are all members of one human family, no matter what the colour of our skin, or our religious beliefs, or our economic circumstances.

Freedom and justice were not intended to be enjoyed only by the wealthy, but are for all. Health care, adequate living conditions, schooling should not be determined by one's ability to pay. There should be meaningful work for all.

The fact that Jesus healed the sick and told such parables as Dives and Lazarus, the labourers in the vineyard and the Talents, supports this view. But when men and women take Jesus seriously and seek to practise his teaching they find themselves in opposition to the established powers of society. The life Jesus proclaimed calls for change in society. It calls for a sharing of power which implies a social revolution.

Some of you may have received the Christmas letter from the Raffans in Brazil. In that letter some of the needs of that country are mentioned. The street children, the abject poverty, the fact that this is true of most Third World countries. Who is to blame? How can things be different? All our charity is like trying to use a band aid to stop the bleeding from a main artery.

A major social revolution is needed. But monarchs want to remain monarchs. Those with power want to hold on to it, whether that power be political, economic or ecclesiastical. But as Mary knew well, all power is in God's hands. In God's sight, whether we think we are the greatest surgeon that ever lived or whether we are a simple street cleaner, whether we are a millionaire or an unemployable alcoholic, we are equally a child of God, and equally loved by God.

Jesus truly inaugurated a social revolution. It is difficult for most of us to accept the fact that wealth, education or a particular skill does not give us a special place in God's favour. Such gifts

do give us greater opportunities to do good and to serve our fellow human beings, but we are not judged according to what we have, but according to the way we use what God has given us.

Mary, carrying the child Jesus in her womb, filled with the Holy Spirit, senses that she stands on the threshold of a new social order. And what a wonderful world that could be. But this, she is told, calls for...

### C) AN ECONOMIC EVOLUTION

For she sang, "The hungry he has satisfied with good things the rich sent empty away." These are not words most of us want to hear. They give rise to a variety of feelings including resentment and even anger at the seeming injustice of God. The Gospel always seems to be taking a poke at the rich. Today we know as never before that, in relationship to most of the people in the world, we are the rich.

Jesus told the story of the prosperous farmer who tore down his barns and built bigger ones and, when these were full to overflowing, he decided to retire and enjoy his accumulated wealth. At the very moment when he thought his future was secure, he died. He was unable to enjoy his savings.

Jesus told the story of Dives, the rich man living in luxury, and Lazarus, the beggar at his gate who ate the scraps from the rich man's table. They both died. Dives went to hell but Lazarus to heaven.

Mary knew what it was to be poor. It is easier for the poor person to dream of a day when there will be an equalization of the consumption of goods and series. But when one is rich, it is not a pleasant thought.

We can liken the world's resources to the food available for a meal. You can choose to serve the plates in the kitchen, making sure that each person gets an equal share. Or you can choose to have a buffet, each one helping themselves. Now a buffet works well if there is an unlimited supply of good things and if each person acts honorably, only taking what they need, thus leaving plenty for everyone else. But when the supply is limited and a few make pigs of themselves, then some may find there is little left. In fact, some will go hungry.

We live in a world of plentiful but not unlimited resources. We live in a world of glaring inequalities. We live in a world in which it is the rich who are satisfied with good things. It is the hungry who are sent empty away.

Mary's song is the promise of change. Therefore the word from God on that first Christmas was a promise of change, radical change.

We have prided ourselves in the past on being a Christian nation a Christian community, but in the midst of a recession it becomes increasingly clear that we haven't as a nation or community accepted the concept of the equality of all of God's children.

Our social safety net is under attack. Many Canadians choose to shop in the United States, which takes jobs from our fellow Canadians. We are threatened by imports from countries that have low wages and few benefits. With the growing movement towards free trade around the world our standard of living may very well be eroded. However it may improve the living standards of developing countries though I fear that, unless radical social and economic changes take place in those countries, all that will happen is that their wealthy class will become wealthier.

But even if we could be guaranteed that a lower standard here would mean a higher standard for the world's poor, would we be willing to tighten our belts and take a smaller helping?

We think of ourselves as a Christian congregation, dedicated to the service of others. But our budget, like the budgets of most other congregations, reflects the fact that we spend 75% at least of what is given on the maintenance of our own organisation. The same is true for our personal budget. Most of our Christmas giving will be directed towards those who have everything they really need.

How would we like to live in a society in which everybody received the same salary regardless of the type of work they did? Jesus suggested that such is the Kingdom of God when he told the parable of the landowner who hired labourers at various stages of the day and then paid them all the same day's wage. Would not that say clearly that we are one family, the family of God?

How would we feel about spending one dollar on someone less fortunate for every one dollar we spend on ourselves?

William Barclay said that "a non-Christian society is an acquisitive society in which each man is out to amass as much as he can. A Christian society is a society where no-one dares to have too much, while others have too little. Where every man must get only to give away."

## CONCLUSION

Christmas with its lights and trees, its songs of peace and good will, can so easily become a nice lullaby, a sentimental lullaby. That's probably what we like about Christmas. But that isn't the real Christmas. It is not the Christmas God had in mind when he came into the world in Jesus the Christ.

Christmas was intended to be a challenge, a confrontation with Almighty God. One that demands that we look at ourselves, look long and deeply into the mirror God holds before us.



God, in the Christ child, challenges our use of the wealth we have. In the mirror we see Lazarus at our door, our brothers and sisters in desperate need.

God in Christ comes as a warning that all the skills of technology lead nowhere except to destruction unless they are placed at the service of those values revealed in the Kingdom of God – unconditional love, freedom, justice, compassion and the fulfillment of the image of God in every person.

God who came in Christ at Christmas reminds us that while God loves all his children and seeks to bring all people into a right relationship with Himself, nevertheless God stands primarily with the poor, the weak and the dispossessed, the powerless.

Because, as Jesus said himself, “It is not the healthy that need the doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what the text means, I require mercy and not sacrifice. I did not come to invite virtuous people but sinners.”

Mary, filled with the Spirit of God, mother of the Christ child, saw in this gift of God the prospect of a moral, social and economic revolution, the fulfillment of her son’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.”

May we too be so filled with the Spirit of God, that the seed that was born in Bethlehem, was nurtured in Nazareth and came to harvest in the ministry of Jesus the Christ, take root in our lives, setting our feet on the road God would have us travel, in order that God’s kingdom of unconditional caring may become more visible here where we live and around the world.