

The Trouble with Prophets

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. It's a kind of law of entropy that applies to community, society, and every human organisation. At this point we need our prophets.



A wise person once told me about the lifecycle of every organisation. It begins with **Vision** and purpose and values, which then attracts **People** to pursue the **Actions** that will further the cause. To do it well, these people organise themselves and develop an **Institution** with all its necessary bureaucracy and systems. At this point, things are humming along; we have Vision + People + Actions + Institution all working in harmony.

Invariably, however, the **Vision** begins to wane. Generations shift, priorities diversify, and what was peripheral begins to displace the original heart. **People** are still involved, at least initially, but as the purpose and point becomes less clear, their energy and numbers lessen. At some point it becomes hard to maintain the **Actions** for which the organisation has become known. All that is left is the **Institution**, and nothing much more.

We've all seen it, board meetings run by the last people standing attempting to do something for a long-lost reason. When we begin to lose the people, we try to put back the people: "Let's appeal for volunteers, let's twist some arms!" When we begin to lose activity, we try and put that back: "Let's do what we did before!" When it's just the institution left, we get tired and fade away. Without a restoration of vision, and purpose, and values, it all begins to stagnate.

This is why we need prophets. They're the people who kick back at the status quo. They're the ones who remind us, "This is not who we are!" They're the ones who guard the values. They tell us when something has become an edifice which needs to be torn down, or when the small and emerging needs to be protected at all costs. While others are caught up in the here and now of activity and institution, or even the present needs of the people, they are the ones who extrapolate the trajectory to its natural consequence, and dare to say, "We should stop!"

We need them. But, to be honest, in my experience, we don't often like them. And we tend to ignore them, condescend to them, or even mistreat them.

Those who attend to the **People** may write the prophetic person off as being harsh and uncaring. Those who attend to the **Activities** and functions, may resent them as a spanner in the works, a stumbling block in the way. Those who attend to the **Institution**, may push them away as rebellious ingrates intent on tearing things down. Sometimes there might be a modicum of truth to their assessment of the prophet, particularly if the prophetic person has not been wise in their dealings. But the prophet is still needed. Or else we will die.

I've come to this thought partly through a recent series we are running in a small group as an introduction to the Old Testament. We've just come to the prophet Elijah, who prophesied in Israel as King Ahab turned the nation (with all its people, and purposes, and institutions) away from the ways of God. In the face of Ahab's idolatry, and cruelty, and injustice, surely Elijah is a voice of reason, a voice of compassion, a voice of hope in the midst of despair. Yet how does Ahab greet him, when they meet in 1 King 18:16?

"Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

You see, Ahab turns it around, and the prophet becomes the “troubler.”

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. At that point we need someone to exercise the gift of troubling us, whether we like it or not. Let us not be like Ahab.

Or consider the prophet Jeremiah. The word he brought from the Lord was about passing through the necessary fire of God’s judgement. Against those who declared there would be victory, Jeremiah stood and announced defeat! He wrote to those who had been taken away by the invading Babylonians, and he did not stir them to resistance or to recapture the glory they had lost; he urged them to submit and settle down in a foreign land (Jeremiah 29), until they were led of the Lord into restoration.

No wonder they tried to kill Jeremiah! His words were tantamount to sedition. He was trying to shift aside the very substance of the edifice that they had become. You can imagine, even the most soft-hearted listener, walking away from Jeremiah, shaking their head as if to say “Mate, you’ve gone too far. Don’t try and tear us down.”

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. And at that point we need someone willing to show us how to start again, or how to get back to the foundations. Some of what we have built may actually need to fall, lest we end up clinging to dust. We need our prophets. Let us not be like the people of Jeremiah’s day.

It’s the same today, you see. There are prophetic people throughout the breadth human experience. They dissent against the status quo. They cannot help but speak. It’s not just in the churchy world. We have prophetic people insisting that a status quo that leads to climate change is untenable and immoral. We have prophetic people persistently whispering

#metoo, niggling and nagging, troubling us, until we notice.

We need them.

Over the years of church leadership, I've been engaged with by many prophetic people. I've tried to listen to all of them. Some of them have been downright wrong; they manifested their own brokenness more than anything else. I hope I didn't just write them off and that I took time to listen. Some of them go off a little half-cocked; they come with a passion and a fire, but we had to dig for the kernel of truth together. I hope I helped them as they helped me. Others are "uncomfortable but wise"; they shared words and spoke of truth that I would rather avoid, but shouldn't. I have learned to value these people, and to ensure they have access and means of communication with me.

Above all, the thing I have learned is this: Most prophetic people are sweet-hearted. They are moved by a longing for things such as shalom peace, or true unity, or justice and truth, and sweet whole-life worship. They see what's in the way of those things, and long to see things move.

They are sweet-hearted, yet I have seen them torn down, and named "arrogant", "overbearing", "destructive", and "hard-hearted." I have seen them condescended to, allowed enough voice so that no-one can say they weren't allowed to speak, but then dismissed. Sometimes their very presence draws out the hypocrisy in the room, as they bear the brunt of it. Those hypocrites tend to be us. If I heed the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:37 it would reveal our heart that would rather kill the prophets and stone God's messengers than heed or hear. The most prophetic person this world has ever known was crucified, by us.

Which is why prophets weep, and hide in caves. Some of them retreat into silence, and burn until it hurts. Some get together amongst the few who understand; the prophetic voice

is reduced to an echo-chamber, and the rest of us miss out. Prophets break. Prophets *feel* the pain of the world. Yet they would point us to life, deep life, true value, and a vision of hope.

Without them we stagnate, and we collectively lose our way.

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