

Speaking truth to power

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42

On 5th June, 1989, an unidentified individual, presume to be a Chinese man, stood in front of a column of Type 59 tanks near Tiananmen Square, Beijing. The confrontation occurred one day after the Chinese Government forcibly cleared the square following six weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people. On 5th June, a lone man carrying shopping bags stepped into the path of the lead tank and refused to move. The moment was capture by cameras and broadcast around the world. Not ultimately successful in dislodging the oppressive Chinese government, Tank Man, or the Unknown Protester, became an image of a prophetic soul standing up against injustice.

In 2011 Pakistani writer and activist Malala Yousafzai, aged 15, was shot by a Taliban gunman. Seriously injured, she lived and went on to work for the right of children to have an education. Aged 17 she received the Nobel Peace Prize. She said: *“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful...I speak not for myself but for those without voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated.”*

People in our world today, from all faiths and none, have a duty to speak out and act up in times where kindness is compromised, inclusion is ignored, selfishness is put on a platform, freedom is threatened. Every time something is thought, said or done in any way diminishes the quality of the society in which we live or the communities where we make our homes, or the country and world where we share responsibilities for the well-being of all, and access to justice for everyone, then our faith, faith inspired by the Old Testament prophets, and faith inspired by Jesus of

Nazareth, impels us with grace and determination to do what we can to call out unacceptable behaviour and, when necessary, speak truth to power.

Uncomfortable reading though it may be, there is a long line of prophets - Amos and Isaiah, Hosea and Joel, Ezekiel and Jeremiah - who seeing the fractures and failings in times in which they lived, acted up, and spoke truth to power. *"Prophecy is not future telling, but articulating moral truth. The prophets diagnose the present and point the way to a just solution. The 'prophetic tradition', in all of the world's great religions, is just what we need to open up our contemporary political options which are (according to one commentator)...failing to solve our most pressing social problems. The competing ideological options from which we are forced to choose, are perhaps at their lowest ebb in compelling the involvement of ordinary citizens in public life. It is not that people just don't care, but they feel unrepresented and unable to vote for anything that expresses their best values."*

Our faith, what we believe, what we stand for, and what we won't stand for, has a duty to be active in the public square. Christianity has values to share about integrity, self-awareness, compassion, inclusion and justice that speak into the political, social and economic realities of C21st Britain.

"...prophets speak because they are compelled by an inexplicable force that is taken to be the summons of (God)...they are non-establishment figures who will not be silenced...these prophets (do not always) utter universal truths, but speak (directly) into a particular time, place and circumstance. (Prophets) are acutely aware of distress, pain and dysfunction...present in the community...(but also) these prophets found fresh and attention-getting ways of imagining (their world) and, in extraordinary acts of courage, talked about possible futures (beyond) despair."

Jeremiah, the outsider prophet, challenged Hanniniah, an establishment Temple prophet who had preached a future of peace and optimism whereas the reality of the day showed a very different truth. It was 594 BC and Babylonian armies had brutally conquered Jerusalem. A congregation of

remaining Jerusalemites met in what was left of the Temple. Hananiah prophesied that Babylon was broken and the exiles and captives would soon return. They had prayed for peace. Jeremiah disagreed. Prophecy, speaking truth to be power, had to be grounded in God's truth, and speaking comforting words that everyone wants to hear masks the reality. Like Neville Chamberlain appeasing Hitler before the brutality of World War Two. Peace, peace, when there was to be no peace. Jeremiah spoke out, and then walked out. *"In a gesture of steeled non-violence, Jeremiah walked silently from the Temple. (An) immutable message ringing beneath his hushed steps: "Beware of any voice who will sell the soul in order to announce good news that makes for a popular pastor and prophet. There is a critical cost for peace. Peace requires soul justice and social justice!"*ⁱⁱⁱ

When it is unfair, unequal, unacceptable, and these things are being caused by society, politics, or economic and social indifference, people of faith are called by God to speak truth to power. When Christians see behaviour in the political world and the civic world that is less from ideal, even if it reflects what is in our some parts of our society, following Old Testament prophet and New Testament Jesus examples, we call it out and speak truth to power. And not only to speak, but to act.

Mother Teresa reminded us that every day we encounter Christ in, "distressing disguise", in those, "hungry and not only for bread, but hungry for love; naked not only for clothing, but naked for human dignity and respect; homeless not only for want of a room of bricks, but homeless because of rejection."^{iv} Christians are not only sent out as disciples of Jesus, and apostles to spread the good news of hope, they are sent out as prophets to point out to what ails society, and to call for things to change where there is hurt or fear, and to model, by their living, what a better world will look like.

Robert Aldridge, Edinburgh's Lord Provost, said at a full City Council meeting last week: "We recently saw a horrific attack on five of our fellow Edinburgh Citizens. We were all shocked and stunned that such an attack should happen in this safe, welcoming and inclusive city. Edinburgh is very proud to be home to many faiths which we respect...our hearts, prayers and thoughts are with the victims and their loved ones. There is no place in our city for Islamophobia, nor will we tolerate any form of discrimination...An attack on any one of us is an attack on all, so let us unite against those who seek to create division and hatred..."^v

Daniel Johnson, our local MSP, spoke in Holyrood last Wednesday drawing a link between language used by Reform politicians and racial violence on our streets. Thomas Kerr, the deputy Reform UK Scottish leader laughed whilst during Johnson's speech about the terror-linked stabbings. Kerr admitted he had been laughing, but later on said it was at Johnson's, "...pathetic fake outrage. What a snowflake!" Elsewhere the Reform leader in Scotland has said that violence is never the answer and that we need cohesion in society. I wonder, would a prophet speak truth to power in this situation and ask any political party if their rhetoric matched their actions; if the society and culture they claim to want matches the peaceable, tolerant and fair community and country in which all God's children hope to live? What is the *truth* of the vision part of the political economy espouses today? People often claim to hunger for truth but seldom like the taste when it is served up.^{vi}

Speaking truth to power may not come up with all of the answers, but it can call out the need for everyone acting on or behalf to demonstrate by which moral compass their actions are directed. That is what the Old Testament prophets were about. And that is what Jesus was about throughout His earthly ministry whenever He got alongside the poor, the sick, the bereaved, the ostracised. When we are called to speak truth to power, let us also remember that we are called to speak

truth to ourselves. *"We have it in us to be Christs to each other...to work miracles of love and healing as well as to have them worked upon us."*^{vii}

"There are two great pathologies in our culture today. One of them is denial. The only antidote for denial is radical truth-telling. The other great pathology is despair. The only antidote for despair is radical hope, grounded in community."^{viii}

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, p72

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, pps622-227

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglass M Bailey, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3* pps 173-175

^{iv} Mother Teresa, *Words to Love By*, p80

^v Robert Aldridge, Lord Provost, 25th June 2026 at Edinburgh City Council

^{vi} George R Martin

^{vii} Frederick Buechener, *A Room Called Remember*, p136

^{viii} Walter Brueggemann, *"City of God for American Cities: Reinventing the Urban Church"*