

PROPHETS & DOOMSAYERS

SERMON St James King Street, Sydney 11 August 2019, 9th Sunday After Pentecost

TEXTS: Isaiah 1:1 (10-20); Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (17-28); LUKE 12:32-40

When my husband and I are with friends I'm sometimes asked what I'm going to preach about the next Sunday, Bill loves to burst out, "You're all doomed!" It's a joke, of course, and everyone laughs but doomsaying seems to want its moment today. Take the psalm, for example. *"Israel, I will testify against you. I am ... your God ... Mark this ... you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver."*¹ It's a prophetic psalm about the divine judge who accuses the people as in a court of law, condemning insincere worship, attacking "going through the motions" with a few sacrifices as if the covenant with God requires no more: *"What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?"* God thunders. *"You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit."*²

It's no better when we think of Isaiah's vision of an angry God. Again, there's the courtroom image with God indicting Israel for religious infidelity. They have neglected the covenant. Their sinfulness and rebelliousness have weakened them so their enemies have invaded and destroyed the land. "It's your own fault!" God declares, condemning the ruling elite, rejecting their worship as half-hearted, their sacrifices as worthless, and their prayers as hypocritical. *"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt-offerings ... I [don't] delight in the blood of bulls. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I [won't] listen; your hands are full of blood!"*³

¹ Psalm 5:7 & 22 selectively

² Psalm 50: 16 & 19

³ Isaiah 1: 11 & 15 selectively

I'm afraid such prophetic critique is as relevant today as in the psalmist's and Isaiah's times⁴. Our world is also rent by social difficulties, political turmoil, violence and rapid change. Throw in complacency or intolerance by churches and believers and we begin to match the Israelites' transgressions thousands of years ago! Sins sadly visible to aggressive secularists who scream hypocrisy.⁵ A "*sinful nation, people laden with iniquity,*" Isaiah has God call the Israelites and the words transcend the ages.⁶

So we're all doomed, it would seem, our hands also *full of blood*. Judged, punished and rejected by a violent, aggrieved and petulant God. Now it's easy to write this off as mere doomsaying. To laugh and say that the psalmist's prophetic raging belongs to a distant past. That we don't believe in Isaiah's violent, unpredictable God. Too easy—and there's an important difference between genuine prophecy and doomsaying. Prophets care about their society and accept responsibility for their own part in it. Their negative critique is grounded in that concern and, while they might issue vigorous warnings, they are prepared to do their bit to change things for the better. Doomsayers also care about their society but they see other people as having to do the changing. "You're all doomed!" has no sense of the personal about it. Doomsayers believe society is doomed unless their views are accepted as right.

And doomsaying has lived just as a long a life as prophecy. It simply doesn't die by its or anyone else's hand and it's burst forth in recent times in our society, strident, bold, and sulphurous. Doomsaying has no trouble attracting disciples because it offers reassurance in the face of strange and sometimes threatening difference, security in the face of change often too rapid to be understood, and certainty in a world where dark clouds always seem to loom on the horizon. Jobs hard to find and

⁴ Dating of both is problematical. Psalm 50 belongs either to the 8th century BC, along with the prophets [Hosea](#) and [Micah](#), or to a time after the [Babylonian captivity](#). Isaiah's [superscription](#) is ascribed to 8th-century BCE prophet [Isaiah](#) ben Amoz, but much of the book is thought to have been belong to the period of the [Babylonian captivity](#) and later. The Babylonian captivity is also varyingly dated, with numbers of deportations from 597 BCE to 581 BCE.

⁵ Note the aphorism "Most men forget God all day and ask God to remember them at night." From a sermon by The Rev'd James Ellis 111 www.huffpost.com

⁶ Isaiah 1:4

easy to lose. Financial upheavals. Discrimination. Homophobia. Misogyny. Immigration. Climate change. Terrorism. Wars. Doomsaying says, “hunker down with me and I will protect you from all that threatens you. I will comfort you and—I will assure you—you are right”.

The disciples of doomsaying are not necessarily bad people. Israel Folau is not a bad person. I don't share his beliefs, and I hope you don't either, but I don't doubt his sincerity. And it wouldn't surprise me if he were bewildered by the storms that surround him and uncertain how to survive them. But, while we might want to reject his opinions, and even wish he'd kept them to himself, we cannot reject him or those like him who may be less vocal but struggle no less with how to respond to a troublesome world.

Which is always a messy muddle. Let me suggest an idea of how we might look at this, how we might heed the prophets, but fend off the doomsayers. I'm not a sociologist so this will probably be rough round the edges but it's just a suggestion. We humans are social animals. That's why communities develop but it seems to me we exist in a continuum. At both extremities are the doomsaying rule makers. At one end they say, “we'll make our own rules, and we don't care what society thinks!” That's where anarchism breeds but so does political zealotry when political zealotry gets its hands on power the outcome is despotism, political tyranny and a stifled society. At the other end, the doomsayers say, “we know what's right and we'll make the rules; society should obey our rules.” That breeds Puritanism and when Puritanism gets its hands on power the outcome is spiritual tyranny and despotism. Which can be just as stifling.

Meanwhile, the rest of us are somewhere in the middle, trying to get on with things, to work out rules that work for everyone, trying to resist the doomsayers on both sides, trying to create civility among us, and trying to discern and honour the true prophets among us. None of us, including the prophets and the doomsayers, has a monopoly on virtue. In the end, we're actually all in the muddle together. Ruefully, I

add that the wearily cynical Ecclesiastes might be the one person who got it right and there really is nothing new under the sun.⁷

But, if we want to heed the prophets, and avoid the doomsayers, and make sure our hands are not *full of blood*, we need to revisit that ancient courtroom of which the psalmist and Isaiah warned and hear God's saying, "*Come now, let us argue it out ... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.*"⁸ God is not only judge, but willing to sit at the negotiating table and put aside damning thunderbolts for the balm of healing love. God is lover, compassionate carer, patient listener, who never fails to offer an out ... ours if we remember what the prophet Micah said — deal with each other justly, kindly, and humility before your God is a good idea.⁹ God did not only say to those who forget God, *I will tear you apart, and there would be no one to deliver.* God also said, *those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me.*¹⁰

Nowhere in the psalm or in Isaiah's vision does the word 'repent' appear but the concept of repentance peeps from behind their words. Of course, this isn't a romantic love story and utopia doesn't exist so the ancient Israelites went on doing what they had always done, drifting from fervent religiosity to complacent neglect and back again, waging war and cheating each other, as the mood and opportunity took them, and so it has been unto this day. But if the people traded in disloyalty to their God and trampled on the obligations and responsibilities of their covenant with God, God was not so disloyal and feckless. God relented. Despite the backsliding and neglect, God said, "*I will show them my salvation*".¹¹ And *to the prisoners*, God said, "'Come out', to those ... in darkness, 'Show yourselves'. With pity I will lead [you], and by springs of water [I] will guide [you]".¹²

⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:9

⁸ Isaiah 1:18

⁹ Based on Micah 6:8

¹⁰ Psalm 50:22-23

¹¹ Isaiah 49: 49:8

¹² Isaiah 49:9-10 selectively & adapted.

Just so, one clear night, with no fanfare at all, a night when the moon filled the sky and one could almost light a candle from the stars¹³ so brightly did they shine, God's salvation came. The one who could deliver the people from their darkness. The Word, who was in the beginning with God, became flesh to dwell among us, to show us the way of salvation. The Christ, the exemplar, to shine in the darkness of our lives, to show us that the darkness need not overcome the light.¹⁴ To show that we need the prophets but not the doomsayers. To show that salvation—the gift of God for the people of God—demands an open ear to the words of the prophets, healthy scepticism about the doomsayers, and a dose of repentance about our own wrongdoings that they too should *be like snow* as God promised. It's not an easy call—it never has been which is why human history is full of disaster, angst and misadventure—but we have our guide, the Christ, who is the way, the truth and the light. Our goal is to make sure that when we hold up our hands to the light of the Christ, they truly are not *full of blood*.

© (The Rev'd) Elaine Farmer, 11 August 2019

(On the occasion of celebrating the 20th anniversary of my preaching at St James King St, Sydney)

¹³ Image from the song 'Galway Bay'

¹⁴ Adapted from John 1:1-5