

# **THE SPIRIT IS ALIVE:**

## ***Prophetic Ministry in the Bible and Today***

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Thank you for inviting me to speak and share with you at this conference which has the general title 'Partners in Mission'. As a visitor from outside I feel it is not my place to try and spell out the practical details of what it means for you to respond to the missionary call. What I propose to do in my two main talks is to focus on two central aspects of the Good News which brings hope to our own lives and which we share with others. This morning my topic is 'The Spirit is Alive: Prophetic Ministry in the Bible and Today'; and this afternoon my topic will be 'Jesus is Alive'.

When we want to think about mission especially at the present time it is best to start not with what we do but with God's initiative—what we call 'the mission of God'. For us Christians a central part of this mission of God is the sending of the Word of God, Jesus, to share our life and our death. But long before the sending of Jesus, God sent the Spirit to work in our world and in each of us, So I propose that we focus attention this morning on this presence and work of the Holy Spirit; then in the afternoon we can go on to reflect on the mission of Jesus.

In the first lines of the Bible we are told that the Spirit moved over the waters bringing shape and order to our world. This was not just a once-off work of the Spirit. In Chapter 8 of St Paul's letter to the Romans we are reminded that creation is longing and groaning with hope to come to fulfillment. So we can take it that the Spirit is still at work in our world drawing meaning and goodness out of the chaos that we humans make through our disrespect for the environment and the order of nature.

Even more important than the work of the Spirit in Nature is the Spirit's activity in us humans. The Bible gives us a detailed account of this work. It can all be included under the general heading of prophecy, that is, actions and words which humans do under the inspiration of the Spirit. There are two characteristics of this kind of prophetic influence of the Spirit in the Old Testament:

—Firstly, the prophets were immersed in the pain, the hope, the struggle and the joy of their own people. Out of this deep solidarity with the people the prophetic word welled up within them.

—Secondly, the word came not simply from within the prophet and within the community but also—and primarily—from a God who remained transcendent. Because it was from a God beyond the limitations of our world, it was capable of bringing new life, new hope and a new power into the world and into God's people.

#### NOT JUST WORDS BUT LIFE-ENERGY

The prophetic spirit is a share in the life and energy of God. The most striking instance of this is the well-known account of how the Spirit of God led the prophet Ezekiel to a valley filled with dead bones and inspired him to breathe new life into them—a life that was a share in God's own breath (Ezek 37:1-10). The prophet's sharing in the divine life also brings with it a power of healing. For instance, Elisha was inspired to heal the leprosy of the Syrian general Naaman (II Kings 5:10). Such acts of healing by the prophets provide the background against which the people of Jesus' time could understand that he was engaged in a prophetic ministry when he was healing the sick and delivering those who found themselves oppressed by evil spirits.

The prophet generally brings a word from God. However, though the term •dabar' means 'word' in Hebrew it also means 'action'. Sometimes the inspiration of the Spirit produces powerful deeds such as the victories of Samson, Judith and Esther—not to mention the triumph of Moses over the Pharaoh. At other times the

message of God came through the very life of the prophet—for instance, when Hosea was told to take a prostitute as his wife (Hos 3:1-3). The prophets were expected to live by and witness to the word they had received; that word became the central focus and meaning of their lives.

Even where the prophet does use words, it may be better not to see this 'message' primarily as a communication of new information or knowledge. More important are the sense of hope and comfort which the message brings. For instance, there are many prophecies in the second part of the book of Isaiah where God is reassuring the people that they will never be forgotten (e.g. 'Can a woman forget her baby at the breast ... but even if she should forget, I shall not forget you'—Is 49:15). Their purpose is to reassure a people who are slipping into hopelessness, or are in danger of losing a sense of their identity as God's chosen people. Even the many prophecies which consist of harsh words of condemnation are ultimately intended to bring comfort and hope to the people—especially to the poor; for to condemn those who are engaged in exploitation is to bring solace to those who are their victims.

#### JESUS AS PROPHET

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus was led by the Spirit and spoke in the name of God. Under the Spirit's inspiration he challenged abuses, he brought comfort and 'Good News' to those who were despised or outcast. Like some of the prophets, Jesus performed healing 'wonders' which gave credibility to his message. His life-style echoed his message—and in this too he followed the prophetic way. And, like several of the major prophets, he was rejected and condemned by those who held power in society.

A chief task of every prophet is one of discernment—not just in personal matters but in relation to crucial public issues in the political, social and religious life of the wider community or nation. For instance, for Jesus a big discernment issue was: should this time be seen as one when a great calamity was facing Israel, or

was it rather a time of new hope and new opportunities? And this is also a big issue

for us today. The Spirit-inspired answer which Jesus gave to this question was that, despite all the evil and tragedy in the world of his time, it was nevertheless a time of great hope—above all for those who were poor or outcast or looked down on. That was the Good News for the people of his time—and that is the same Good News which we are called to believe in and live by today.

In the New Testament we see that the first Christians saw themselves as successors to the prophets of the earlier era and as sharing in the life and work of Jesus—and therefore moved by the same Spirit. It was the outpouring of the Spirit which inspired them to reach out and share their experience of God with others (Acts 2:14-41), at first to their Jewish compatriots and before long to the pagan world around them. The letters of St Paul show that it was quite normal for the early Christians to find themselves inspired by the prophetic Spirit; the purpose of such prophecy was to build up the Christian community and to give encouragement and consolation to people (I Cor 14:4; cf I Thess 5:20).

It is clear from the New Testament that the inspiration of the Spirit found expression in a great variety of ways—in visions (Acts 7:55; 16:9), guidance (Acts 21:4; Gal 5:18), boldness (Acts 4:31), wonders (Acts 8:13-8; Rom 15:14; I Cor 12:9), predictions of the future (Acts 11:28; 20:23; 21:11), strange tongues (Acts 19:6; I Cor 12:10; 14:2), as well as an outpouring of enthusiasm (Acts 2:4-13) and the gifts of faith (I Cor 12:3, 9), wisdom, understanding and discernment (I Cor 2:12-3; 12:8,10), healing (I Cor 12:9), comfort and strength (Acts 9:31; Eph 3:16), freedom (Rom 8:15), love, peace, gentleness and patience (Gal 5:22-3), fervour (Rom 12:11), joy (Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22; I Thess 1:6), prayer (Rom 8:26; Eph 6:18), a sense of expectancy and hope (Rom 8:23; 15:13) and a conviction that one is the child of God (Rom 8:14; Gal 4:6). We today are offered the same gifts of the Spirit.

WHAT IS INSPIRATION?

Inspiration is a share in the 'breath' of God, that is, in God's own life, given to us as a free and unpredictable grace. Because it is truly divine it cannot find any single fully adequate articulation or embodiment in our world. But it finds partial expression in four main spheres of human living:

—The first is the sphere of ideas and truth; so inspiration often comes to us in the form of a new insight or vision, or as a vivid conviction of some truth, or a deep understanding and wisdom.

—A second sphere in which the movement of the Spirit finds partial expression is that of action; so it comes to us in the form of commitment, eagerness, zeal, energy, and the power to overcome laziness, wounds, blocks or addictions.

—A third sphere is that of the wide variety of deep feelings and sensations such as awe, wonder, sorrow, joy, love, trust, fear, strength, fragility, hope.

—The fourth sphere in which the Spirit influences people is in the body—for instance, in the flow of inspired energy which we see in the graceful ritual dances of the peoples of Asia and in the exuberant dances of Africans. Under this heading we might also include the bodily endurance which sometimes comes as a grace to keep one going when ordinary human resources have been exhausted.

All these are expressions or manifestations of the inspiration of the Spirit.

Different expressions are appropriate for different people in different situations; and none are fully adequate or definitive. The one word which comes closest to expressing the core of divine inspiration is the word 'life'. The Spirit's touch brings us the energy of the creative divine life. So we pray with the psalmist: 'Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created; and you will renew the face of the Earth.' (Ps104:30).

#### WE ARE A PROPHETIC MOVEMENT IN SOCIETY

As followers of Jesus we are privileged to be part of a great prophetic movement inspired and led day by day by the Spirit of Jesus. Jesus had a divinely inspired dream of a new earth (cf. Is 65:17-25). He invites us to share with him the task of channelling God's life-giving power and energy into dry bones (Ezek 37).

Springing from the creative Spirit of God, this new dream and life-energy are powerful and attractive. Those who are open to the Spirit feel called to gather around those who have this prophetic vision and become followers of Jesus, sharing the new vision and new life. The inspiring Spirit touches the followers of Jesus in the deep places of the spirit of every human person (cf. Rom 8:16).

The prophetic seed of new life finds a particularly fruitful soil among those who are poor or despised, because these have nobody else to turn to but God. God has a special love for the poor and the marginalised. Indeed St Paul tells us that God chooses as special instruments those of low social standing who are generally considered weak or foolish (I Cor 1:26-8).

#### A LIFE-AND DEATH STRUGGLE

Christianity as a life-giving prophetic movement finds itself opposed to—and opposed by—the forces in society and in the human heart which promote deceit, moral decadence, lethargy and death. A struggle of some kind is inevitable—and there is no guarantee that the struggle will have a successful outcome in the short-term. Our prophetic movement achieves a victory to the extent that it succeeds in replacing the unjust structures of society or at least in establishing some 'spaces' of liberation or resistance which will give witness to the possibility of an alternative society. On the other hand, our prophetic movement is defeated if it becomes infiltrated and subverted and begins to collude in injustice. The most common outcome of the struggle is a mixture of success and collusion. Most prophetic movements end up being partly prophetic and partly conformist. This applies to Churches, religions, and all kinds of voluntary organisations. The issue for us today is to what extent we are willing to allow ourselves to be moved and guided by the prophetic Spirit of Jesus, in order to bring healing, reconciliation, justice and transformation into our world