

The Prophets

Class 3

“The economy of the Old Testament was deliberately so oriented that it should prepare for and declare in prophecy the coming of Christ, redeemer of all men. Even though they contain matters imperfect and provisional, the books of the Old Testament bear witness to the whole divine pedagogy of God's saving love: these writings are a storehouse of sublime teaching on God and of sound wisdom on human life, as well as a wonderful treasury of prayers; in them, too, the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way.- CCC 122

What is a Prophet?

There has been an enduring desire by humans to learn how to predict the future, how being a prophet DOES NOT mean that one can predict the future. A prophet is one that speaks on behalf of God, a prophet is one that speaks the truth. The truth is timeless so if a prophet makes a statement on God's behalf it is true, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. When we connect the dots and see God's work in our lives we can see certain truths about ourselves and the world around us. When we speak and act on those truths we are being prophets. When we were baptized, we were baptized as priest, prophet, and king! We are all called to preach truth, and in charity proclaim and speak on behalf of God's truth. Trying to predict the future for the sake of wanting to know the future is NOT a prophecy.

Old Testaments Prophets

Prophets in the Old Testament straddle two worlds: the divine and the earthly. On the one hand, they make the audacious claim to speak for God and on the other, the prophets are entirely human, shaped by their world and bound by their time and culture. When reading the biblical prophets, one must take into account the various cultural forces that influenced them. The history, geography, political system, culture, values, language, and Jewish tradition must be kept in mind. The three major Old Testament prophets are Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. In general Isaiah is filled with messianic predictions. Ezekiel is very descriptive and uses intense imagery to describe the transition of exile and abandonment to restoration and renewal. Jeremiah focuses on what got the Jewish people in their mess to begin with and has a slightly negative tone as God criticizes his people for abandoning him.

The books of the bible that bear the names of these author's may or may not have been fully written by them. In particular Isaiah is more of a compilation of different texts that form a multi-section, multi-point book that moves through the process of destruction, exile, and restoration.

Prophets- Building on the Covenants

The covenant that is established by the Old Testament prophets builds upon both a political and spiritual history of the Jewish people. As was established in the last class God is trying to adopt more than just a family, or a nation, he is trying to adopt the whole world. The pinnacle of Jewish history the reign of David and his son Solomon and the building of the temple. Instead of dedicating the entire kingdom to God, the kingdom split and so God was not able to adopt them, so he instead set his sights on something bigger: all kingdoms. The new covenant that is prophesied in the major Old Testament prophets occurs after the split of the kingdom during the Babylonian exile. Although the prophets speak when the house of David seems to be falling apart during a time of exile, the prophets always point to a greater good that will happen in the future. Soon God will not only make a covenant with his people, he will give someone that IS a covenant. A seed of patience is buried in the prophets as they tell the people to wait for the “already and the not yet.”

History

Israel's history began in centuries ago, c. 1700BC in Egypt. According to the bible, Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. Remarkably, he somehow rose to be second to pharaoh in Egypt. Joseph being wise prepared Egypt for a famine, when the famine hit his family went to Egypt searching for food. The tribe of Abraham (the Hebrews) settled in Egypt, but soon

thereafter the memory of what Joseph did for the Egyptians faded. The Egyptians soon enslaved the Hebrews so that the land of their refuge became the land of the bondage. Soon God had to deliver the Hebrews from slavery passing dry-shod through the Red Sea. Here, salvation begins in earnest at the ‘Mountain of God’ where Moses was called by God to deliver the Hebrews. After being freed, they wander in the wilderness for 40 years and fell to worshipping a false god: a golden calf. The twelve tribes of Israel finally settled in the land of Canaan and are ruled by a series of Judges – Men who function as military, political, and juridical leaders. This provisional system of government fails, the tribes split, and an eventually a king arises: Saul. The second King of Israel is David, the son of Jesse. David unites the twelve tribes around a singular capital – Jerusalem. 40 years later, David’s son Solomon, succeeds him. Solomon has the great accomplishment of building the temple, but at his death civil war breaks out. The kingdom fractures and 10 tribes break away in the north forming the northern kingdom of Israel that is eventually controlled by Assyria. The southern two tribes form the Kingdom of Judah. In c. 800 BC the northern kingdom attempts to rebel against Assyria and is utterly destroyed in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah managed to survive a bit longer, but the Babylonians eventually destroy them in 587 BCE. Babylonia weakens and in 538 falls to the Persian king. After that the Jews are released from captivity and can return to Judah to rebuild the Temple. The Old Testament prophets are primarily speaking during this period of political failure, exile, and prophesize about the eventual restoration of the House of David. (Hint: Jesus)

A New Day Will Come

The theme of the prophets was two-fold: 1) to criticize the people for breaking the Old Covenant (over, and over, and over..) and 2) to promise them that better days will come again through a New Covenant. This New Covenant would be one of renewal, restoration, and growth. There will be a new Zion, a New King, a New Temple, and a New Jerusalem. The prophets also point to truths that may still be in the act of unfolding. Again, a prophet does not predict the future, but the truth that they proclaim never changes, rather is fulfilled. Some transcends our human reason, and points to the completion of the New Covenant, the Parousia/eschaton. The eschaton is the final event of God’s divine plan on earth and the Parousia is the second coming of Jesus. On a micro-level this applies to each of us and our own salvation at our own particular judgement. The general judgment will be at the second coming of Jesus when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

