

Sermon on the occasion of the Induction of the Revd Dr Michael Hopkins as Moderator of the Wessex Synod of the United Reformed Church

Saturday 23rd March, 2024, London Street URC, Basingstoke.

The Revd Dr John P Bradbury, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church.

Readings: Jeremiah 29:4-7; Psalm 121;
Philippians 4:4-9 & 13; John 12:24-26

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 29:8-9).

These words come immediate after the reading from Jeremiah we listened to. They mark out the words of our text today as being the words of a true prophet – not the words of the false prophets whose message is being contrasted with the words of the true prophet.

The people Israel have had their lives turned upside down. Jerusalem, their pride and joy – their holy city, the very dwelling place of God on earth, had been destroyed. The Babylonians had laid waste to everything about their life they'd ever presumed, and carted off to exile some of the key members of society. Unrooted and living in the foreign country of their sworn enemy there was a choice of prophets available. There is often a choice of voices to heed, so how does one discern which voices might be the voices of wisdom, and which the voices that might lead one astray?

Many were listening to those whose message they liked, those who they wanted to believe. What were these voices saying? 'it will soon be over', and 'vengeance will be yours', and 'resist your enemy – destroy them from within'. How we like to pay heed to the voices that say the things we want to hear. To follow the people on Twitter and Tic-tok who chime with the way we see the world. To vote for those who promise us the earth because we want it to be true.

Such voices are false prophets. They lie.

The words we heard read to the exiles, about settling down, planting gardens, building houses, creating families, and seeking the welfare of the city in which the exiles found themselves must have stuck in the throat. Why on earth would you seek the good of your sworn enemy? And who wants to hear that that the nightmare is going to go on for 70 years....far more than the rest of my lifetime, and for many beyond the lifetime of their children.

If this text really is setting out the difference between being a false prophet, and a true prophet, I wonder what that difference is? What marks out a true prophet? What might we



learn about God's true prophetic Word in our midst? How might these words guide Michael in the prophetic dimension of his ministry? How might these words guide Wessex Synod and its churches to be truly prophetic communities?

Perhaps the first thing we note is that the exiles are forced to face reality as it really is. Their defeat was catastrophic and overwhelming, and nothing was going to reverse it quickly. To think anything else was to buy into a false hope. If the exiles were to be able to live well, and even flourish, in their new and unwelcome context, the first thing they had to do was accept it. Harking back to the good old days was no good – for they were not going to return for at least 70 years, and as one quickly realises, one never does go back to the good old days. Only forward. To be a true prophet is to be realistic.

So when your new Moderator tells you that of course every congregation can have its own minister, that of course every new minister he inducts will restore the Sunday School to many scores or hundreds of children, will visit everyone in need every day, and magic an army of Elders, Secretaries, Treasurers and people for the tea-rotta out of nowhere....well...you might be just a little sceptical.

Part of the prophetic ministry of the Moderator is precisely to help congregations face reality as it is. And much of our reality is currently extremely challenging. Pretending otherwise and that there are easy solutions gets us nowhere. We are required to face reality squarely, name it, and engage with it. That is the task of the truly prophetic Moderator.

“Plant gardens and build houses... “ A true prophet is not simply a realist, but a hopeful realist. However tough things become, we can all plant a seed. There is not one congregation in this Synod, that could not do just one small thing now, that might potentially grow into something flourishing and nourishing in the future.

It could be a small change to church life, it could be deciding to use some money to try a new thing. It could be as simple as the intentional act of kindness the congregation takes to care for someone in need or distress. It could be attempting to nurture a whole new garden – pioneer a new and radically different congregation, employ a children's and youth worker.

A Moderator who is a true prophet will help you spot the seeds that you can plant today, that might never feed you – but stand the possibility of feeding those who come after you. A prophetic Moderator will be hopeful – not naively optimistic, or living in fantasy land, but a prophet who will help you see something in a different light, and spot the possibility within it.

Even as churches reach the end of their mission and close, as realistically we know many will in the next few years – they can do so in a way that plants a seed for something new to emerge. As Christians, we are called to die hopefully. “For unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”.

“Take wives and have sons and daughters, takes wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage....” Here we have realistic, hopeful encouragement to build and nurture flourishing human communities. Households of any shape and size can be a flourishing community, and churches are equally called to be flourishing communities. Flourishing communities don't just happen,— they take work, and maintenance. Community life is not easy

– it goes wrong. Sometimes badly wrong, A truthful prophet is one that encourages and nurtures flourishing communities.

A truly prophetic Moderator is called to be a pastor. I know through my own personal experience, as I'm sure many of you do already, just what a pastor Michael is. A prophetic Moderator will encourage healthy community, built on respect, transparency, and trust – and insist on a sound measure of good order as well.

I can assure you that Michael is very hot on good order – I think you'll find plenty of that, somehow! But good order and good governance is often the bedrock of good relationships, and good relationships the bedrock of good communities. Good communities are the bedrock of flourishing of all of us.

“That they may bear sons and daughters”. A true prophet is concerned with the place of children and young people at the very centre of God's people, and for the well-being and flourishing of the generations to come. Concerned, therefore, for the future of the planet that will be the home of those who come after us, a true prophet is concerned with the handing on of the faith to the next generation. All of that too, should be at the heart of the prophetic ministry of a Moderator.

“Multiply there, and do not decrease”. A true prophet is concerned with growth. And yes – I do mean numerical growth. Whilst being realistic about the situation the church finds itself in, a true prophet insists that growth is vital. To be alive is to be renewing constantly, is to be growing. We believe we have a profoundly precious gift in our knowledge of God and God's ways with the world in Christ. We believe it transforms individual lives and the lives of communities. We want others to share what we know and experience of the difference that makes – to share the hope that is within us.

A prophetic Moderator will challenge you to grow, to be intentional, and active about your plans to grow – just as I know Michael, and the good folk of Farnham, have challenged themselves with that vocation in recent years.

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile”. A true prophet does not rage against the enemy place that has become home. However foreign it feels, whatever terrible things the Babylonians had done to the Israelites – the were to seek their welfare. A true prophet turns the eyes of the community outwards from their own immediate concerns, such that they recognise that their own wellbeing is totally bound up with the wellbeing of others – because we are all interconnected and interdependent.

A prophetic Moderator will challenge you to lift your eyes to the world around you, the world on your doorstep (and how good it is to have representatives of civic society with us today) – the world around the globe (and how good it is to have partners from the world church with us today).

A prophetic Moderator will challenge you to be people of justice and peace, a people seeking the integrity of creation, a people who understand that our very wellbeing is intimately tied up in the wellbeing of our fellow creatures in our planet home.

And so, we gather as Michael is inducted into this office. He is challenged by this text to be a true prophet in your midst. The challenge for the Synod is to live as a prophetic people. Being prophetic, however, is ultimately not a human activity. I can no more be a prophet in my own human power than Michael.

You cannot be prophetic communities of realistic hope in your own strength. If we feel overwhelmed by the prospect of living up to this vision of the truly prophetic – that's why. But we do not do it in our own power. We do it in the power of God's Spirit – alive and active in the world today, within and around us – taking us by surprise, always ahead of us calling us into new places and ways of being.

I finish with the words of St. Paul: "whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. I can do all things through him who strengthens me".

Amen.