

2019 4th SUNDAY

God enables a prophet to see truth in all its starkness and then commands a prophet to speak out boldly in its defence. Listening to a prophet can be uncomfortable because the response demanded by the prophet often means a change in the way we may have been thinking and acting. Nobody likes to be told they are wrong. As a result prophets tend to make us angry.

In today's Old Testament Reading we meet Jeremiah. When God first called him to be a prophet, Jeremiah was less than enthusiastic and tried to wrangle out of the call to prophecy. He said, 'Look, Yahweh, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.'

But God was insistent: "I have appointed you as a prophet to the nation. So now brace yourself for action. Stand up and tell them all I command you. They will fight against you but shall not overcome you; for I am with you to deliver you.'

A prophet can't be a softie. A prophet must be able to stand up against public opinion. A prophet has to be as tough as steel and totally uncompromising in matters concerning the truth.

When I was a seminarian in Dunedin 33 years ago I met a woman who was, most definitely, a prophet. Her name was Mary O'Neill. Mary married a Frenchman and now lives in France so these days is out of public focus in New Zealand.

Mary has an implacable hatred for Abortion and feels called by God to confront people who support Abortion eyeball to eyeball.

When she was visiting America Mary somehow got to be in the same room as Tip O'Neill, who was then the Speaker of the House of Congress. Tip O'Neil strongly advocated the right of women to have Abortions. Mary strode up to him and told him to his face that in voting for Abortion he was a disgrace to the name 'O'Neill'. Mary was lucky to get out of America without a jail sentence.

Mary did earn a conviction for dressing up as Santa Claus in order to enter the Ward at Dunedin Hospital where women came seeking abortions. Mary went from woman to woman trying to convince them to change their minds.

Mary knew every doctor in Dunedin involved in Abortions. It was well known that if they saw her approaching in the Street they would cross the road and take refuge in the nearest shop to avoid an inevitable confrontation with her. At University Mary was constantly harassed by supporters of Abortion. On at least three occasions she was spat upon by students.

Mary was forever prodding me to be more active against Abortion. Being in Mary's company was like having a sharp pebble in my shoe. I pretty soon came to understand how prophets are mighty hard people to coexist with.

Christ was the greatest prophet of all. Every word He spoke came directly from the mind and heart of God.

It didn't take long for Jesus to be utterly detested by the people of Nazareth.

They believed that they, as Jews, were the chosen ones of God and as such had a prior call on God's love. Jesus told them that such a God was a figment of their imaginations. He taught them that all people, regardless of race, religion or culture are loved by God and will attain salvation if they have faith. Jesus illustrated this by citing the examples of Elijah and Elisha who performed great miracles for pagans even though there were many sick Jews left uncured. To say the least- this did not go down well.

Added to this, they had heard of the marvellous miracles Jesus had worked in Capernaum and other Villages and were jealous. Jesus was a local. So they believed that in a sense they 'owned' Jesus and had first call on His powers.

Jesus was not about to be owned by anyone. He was a prophet- formed by the power of the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, consecrated and anointed to God's service at His Baptism by John. God alone would guide Jesus as He exercised His ministry- not the people of Nazareth. Jesus refused to be controlled by them. He would have no part in their pettiness or their meanness of vision. In no uncertain terms Jesus spelt it out to them that God's power could not be manipulated or controlled by mere creatures.

In anger the people of Nazareth attacked Jesus and tried to murder him. Not surprisingly we don't ever hear of Jesus returning home again.

The world desperately needs strong men and women committed to telling the truth. The world needs prophets. We need people like Pope

Francis and Mary O'Neill to stand up for God's truth. Many people will roundly hate such prophets.

It is for us to prayerfully reflect on the essential message of prophets. What is God telling us through them? How should we respond?

Apathy is not an option.