

# **Prophet to the Nations**

## **(Church called to be a Prophetic Community)**

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### **Introduction**

The generally inevitable, and even necessary, historical process of a prophet being succeeded by a priest, a charismatic leader by a bureaucrat and a revolutionary movement eventually ending up as a sedate and structured institution has been pointed out and clearly explained by the well known sociologist Max Weber.<sup>1</sup> But as he has also indicated, there is not only the possibility but also the actual occurrences in many societies of the reverse process of the priest critiqued by a prophet, the bureaucrat being challenged by a charismatic leader and stratified institutions and societies renewed by individuals and groups who decry the loss of their foundational vision and values and demand return to the roots.<sup>2</sup>

The above-mentioned processes are well illustrated in the history of Israel in the Old Testament. Having been lead out of the bondage of the imperial establishment of Egypt by Moses, a charismatic leader, and having settled in Palestine they continued to envision themselves as an 'alternative community' similar to neighbouring societies, especially Egypt,<sup>3</sup> and had a form of governance marked by tribal equality, ensured by the collaborative

leadership of the elders at the village level and by the Judges at a higher level, who emerged from among them as and when needed. But soon the tribal egalitarianism was replaced by the institution of the monarchy. The rule of kings starting with Saul, David and his successors gave rise to autocracy and an aristocratic class who ruthlessly exploited the masses.<sup>4</sup>

It is the period of monarchy that witnessed also the emergence of the prophetic movement in Israel. Different prophets publicly raised their voices against the oppressive measures and practices of the kings and the richer sections and called the whole nation to return to the ideals of the covenant.<sup>5</sup>

In a comparable way, the original charismatic movement that was Christianity pioneered by Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, and the band of the disciples started a new way of life whose defining ideal was, "you are all brothers and sisters" (Mt 23:8). But soon it became a hierarchically structured church, organized and administered mostly in the model of the Roman empire with the ranks of the clergy and laity reflecting the Roman divide between the equestrians and plebians.<sup>6</sup> But the two millennia of church's history is also replete with charismatic individual like St. Francis of Assisi and various religious movements that sought the renewal of the church according to the original ideals and values of its founder, Jesus Christ.

Vat. II is one such remarkable instance in which the various renewal movements of the previous more than hundred years had their confluence and accelerated momentum and they succeeded in ushering in what has been experienced as a new Pentecost. Because of the fresh insights and energies it opened up, the predominantly hierarchical church started defining itself anew as "the people of God," the self-engrossed church opened itself to the world, rigidly ritualized liturgy that was the monopoly of the clergy came to be seen as the celebration of the entire community, the apologetic and often antagonistic attitude towards other denominations and religions gave way to the more open approach of dialogue etc.

But fifty years after the start of the Vat.II Council one often gets the impression that the church is speedily slipping back to the pre-Vat II morass

of excessive administrative centralization, liturgical uniformity and rigidity, magisterial conservatism, missionary paralysis that is bereft of creative approaches to contemporary social issues, pastoral obsolescence that betrays a lack of sensitivity and seriousness in responding to the aspirations and needs of many groups in the church which have been hitherto marginalized and have started claiming their rightful place and role.<sup>7</sup>

So there is an urgent need of various concerned and committed individual and groups of Christians to awaken themselves to the very identity of the church as a prophetic community called to transform the world by living out in itself the reality to the reign of God and proclaiming it. It is in this background that a brief attempt is made in the following sections to show how Israel was called to be the light to the nations by its contrast character, and the Jesus movement started as a counter – cultural community and how today the church can effectively and relevantly carry out its role as a prophet.

### **1. Israel: Light to the Nations**

Israel was called by God and covenanted to Himself not only for its own freedom and well-being, but also to be a sign to the nations so that they also realize and respond to God's offer of salvation in their own lives and history. That is why already in the call of Abraham is included the promise: "In you will the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3; also 18:12; 22:12). In fact, the uniqueness of Israel consists not in that it alone of all peoples is chosen, called and freed from bondage to be God's own people, but in its mission to the nations by becoming, a contrast society<sup>8</sup> a shining exemplar that would manifest to all peoples what God has destined them all to be. As Gerhard Lohfink points out, "election of the people takes place *for the sake of the others*. The chosen people is to become a sign to the other peoples of what God plans to do with the world as a whole."<sup>9</sup>

But the perennial temptation of the people of Israel was to understand their election and call by Yahweh in a tribal and exclusive manner and to wallow in triumphalistic invertedness. That is why God taunts them through

prophet Amos, "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?... Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Captor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Am 9:7). And the book of Jonah, which is a satirical critique of the triumphallistic exclusiveness of Israel represented by the figure of the prophet, has God challenging their self preoccupation by asking the prophet, "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left...?" (Jon 4:11). The unique nature of the vocation of the people of Israel is well expressed in the declaration to 'the servant of Yahweh' who is a figure representative of the righteous people among Israel: "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach the end of the earth" (Is 49:6).

Israel was to carry out this mission first of all by being a holy people corresponding to the all holy Yahweh who had called and delivered them and covenanted them with Himself as His own people: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy: (Lev 19:2). Yahweh God is holy because He is the utterly other, incomparable with the gods of other nations: "who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness?" (Ex 15:11). His incomparable holiness consists in the fact that He is the true God and creator whereas the others are man-made gods who are false and are only idols: "For all the gods of the people are idols" (1 Ch 16:26). Because they are human-made they cannot give life to humans. Rather, they are agents of death and dehumanization in so far as worship to them often involved sacrifice of human beings including children, cult prostitution and they mostly functioned to legitimize the oppressive power of the rulers who had installed them. Yahweh, on the other hand, is the utterly other, transcendent, creator. Not only He creates and gives life but also fights against all forces of dehumanization and death (Ex 14:25).

Israel, His chosen people, had to be also holy by remaining a distinct and different community which would not defile itself by any impure and

dehumanizing form of worship, law and social structure. Pure worship acceptable to Yahweh God is not the blood and fat of bulls and lambs but the life of righteousness: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Is 1:16-17; Amos 6:23-24). Leaders from among them, be they kings, priests or prophets, cannot claim to be divine, as the gentile kings and priests often did, and arrogate to themselves unconditional power or absolute authority. For they were all God's own people who were all called by Him to live in freedom, equality and fellowship. The law which was cherished by them as God's own word was meant to ensure such equality and freedom.

Despite such lofty ideals and sublime laws there was always the danger of Israel slipping back into the gentile ways of greedy land grabbing and inhuman bonded labour due to indebtedness. That is why there was the mandated periodic restoration of the covenantal freedom and equality that had been structured into the law itself by way of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> year as the Jubilee Year. In that year slaves were to be set free, lands returned to the original owners and debts forgiven. Thus, being the people of God meant in practice that Israel would become a prophetic contrast community and shining model beckoning all nations to realize in themselves also the same ideals.

## 2. Jesus' Prophetic Community

There is general agreement among the New Testament scholars today that the historical Jesus did not found a new structure religion called Christianity nor did he explicitly establish the institution called the church.<sup>10</sup> What he seems to have gone about doing was founding smaller village communities of the reign of God, which he had hoped would transform, like yeast mixed with the flour (Mt 13:33), the whole people of Israel, and eventually the whole world as well.<sup>11</sup> He was, in fact, the prophet who initiated a new religious movement aimed at the radical renewal of the Jewish

society, returns to and deepening of the covenantal laws and the teachings of the prophets of old, articulated anew as the reign of God. It would be a new society rooted in the experience of the Abba God's love that would be lived out as acceptance and love of all human beings as God's own children and therefore brothers and sisters to one another.

It is with this vision of establishing Israel and the whole of humanity as the reign of God that Jesus along with the twelve and some women disciples constituted themselves into a model but itinerant community (Lk 8:1-3). It was a counter-cultural fellowship that sought to concretely live out and realize the vision and values of the reign of God that he preached in contrast to those of the contemporary society.

Scholars have also pointed out that Jesus with his band of disciples did not go about simply preaching and healing but also sought to transform society by establishing, in the various villages and towns where some people at least accepted his message, counter-cultural communities of the reign of God. Though the gospels do not explicitly mention any such community, his reference to his followers as "little flock" (Lk 12:32) and "a city built on a hill" (Mt 5:14) do suggest their existence. Scholars also tend to believe that the contrast ethics he preached (Mt 5-7; 18-19) was primarily addressed to such communities.<sup>12</sup> At least one such community we know definitely existed in Jerusalem after his resurrection (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37). It was probably founded by the historical Jesus himself during his visits there.

These were contrast communities in which the pyramidally structured social set-up of the surrounding society at large was replaced by egalitarian community relations and structures of brotherhood and fellowship (Mt 23:8-11), economic exploitation gave way to common ownership and sharing (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35), politics of hegemonic power and domination was substituted by that of humble service (Mk 9:35; 10:42-45; Jn 13:14), the culture of purity and pollution was supplanted by that of humanitarian concern and compassion for the weak, and religion that had degenerated into an alienated cult and rigid legalism became transformed into the celebration of the agapic living in

which love of God was experienced and expressed as love of neighbor (Mt 5:23; 17:7; Mk 2:27; Lk 10:30-37; Jn 13:34-35).

Jesus as the prophet of the reign of God, of course, went about preaching and proclaiming the good news. He also sent out the twelve (Lk 9:1-2) and another seventy (Lk 10:1ff) to proclaim the reign of God. In fact almost everyone who had come to believe in him and his message, whether explicitly asked by him or not, invariably went a way and proclaimed his good news to others. The Samaritan woman who brought her whole village to believe in him is the most telling example of such voluntary proclaimers (Jn 4).

But more than their preaching it their prophetic witnessing by their counter cultural lives that Jesus realized would be more effective. That is why he tells his believers, "you are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... let your light shine before others" (Mt 5:13-16). And in fact, it is only the preaching of the apostles but also, perhaps even more so, as the book of Acts suggests, it is the counter-cultural life style of the first Christians that seems to have helped to add day by day to their number (Acts 2:43-47).

### 3. Being Prophetic Today

Though Jesus did not explicitly found the church, the basileic communities that he established and the reign of God movement that he initiated soon enough developed into the church. And even today the church in its authentic nature is only the communion of such communities and its real purpose is to be a prophetic sign and instrument of the reign of God. And if it loses such a prophetic character and role it becomes like "Salt that has lost its taste... It is no longer good for anything" (Mt 5:13).

The church today can fulfill its prophetic role first and foremost by becoming an authentic witness and effective sign of the reign of God. As Norman Kraus puts it, "The life of the Church *is* its witness. The witness of

the Church *is* its life. The question of authentic witness is the question of authentic community.”<sup>13</sup> This the church does by actualizing in the minds and hearts of its members, in their interpersonal relationships and their community structures, services and life the vision and values, attitudes and relational patterns, concerns and commitments of the reign of God. It is to be a contrast community with its caring relationships in an uncaring world, compassionate service to the lost and the least in a society marked by the ruthless domination and exploitation of the weak and poor by the rich and powerful, cultivate justice and human rights in a country which is becoming increasingly unjust and where the rights of the marginalized are least protected, foster dialogue and cooperation at all its levels and with all its sections or subgroups instead of competitive rivalry and conflicts among them.

Church’s counter-cultural presence right in the midst of the society, however basic and vital it might be, is not adequate in itself for fully and effectively carrying out its prophetic role. It has to also proclaim the good news, the person and message of Jesus Christ, whenever, wherever and in whatever way possible. As Pope John Paul points out, proclamation enjoys “the permanent priority of mission.”<sup>14</sup> In this regard the words of St. Paul are as much valid in our times as in his: “...how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Rom 10:14); “....woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16).

Of course, traditional forms of proclamation and direct evangelization may not be possible today everywhere as in earlier times. But even today there are quite many places in India and Tamilnadu where such a proclamation can be done. However, even in such places and situations and effective proclamation requires the utilization of the various means and the media that modern society and technology offer. Particularly important in this regard are the popular art forms, especially the folk arts, and the media such as cinema, TV, internet etc.

Similarly, there are many new ways that have opened up for the church to make its prophetic voice heard and its life-giving message communicated. Some such ways are dialogue and cooperation with other believers and even non-believers in inter-religious and social issues. Another effective way by which the church can proclaim its good news is its intervention in the civil society, especially by its active collaboration with other groups and movements that are committed to creating a new humane and just society.<sup>15</sup> In India toay ecological, feminist, anti-caste, anti-corruption, human rights, literacy movements are some important examples that call for the church's greater involvement and collaboration.

### **Conclusion**

The twin-temptation that the church faces today as in the past are conformity to the world and introverted other-worldliness. Right from the time of emperor Constantine who while granting freedom to Christianity also succeeded to a large extent in coopting it into his imperial regime, the church in many respects sold its birth right of being faithful to the gospel of Christ for the porridge bowl of acceptance, security, wealth, power and influence. Such alliance of the church in the subsequent centuries as well with the hegemonic persons and groups often caused it to compromise its prophetic role and to become like salt that had lost its taste.

Another temptation that seriously frustrates the church's essential prophetic role is that it remains mostly a cultic institution focused primarily on offering rigidly ritualized worship and conducting pious devotions and spiritual activities with the view to saving people from worldly engagements that are seen as distractions and deviations from the path to heaven. As Richard Gaillardetz indicates, "on of the perennial temptation for the church has been to ignore its orientation in mission toward the world."<sup>16</sup> But Jesus' mission was not an other-worldly project of leading people away from the world to a heaven in another world, nor was it merely an exclusive spiritual endeavour of enabling them to preserve their minds and hearts pure and

their personal lives holy. Rather, his was the project of the reign of God or bringing, in Johannine terminology, 'abundance of life for all' (Jn 10:10). That is why he functioned as the prophet who proclaimed "the year of the Lord's favour" that will enable people to experience the Abba God's unconditional love and live as His beloved sons and daughters embracing in fellowship all human beings as brothers and sisters with economic sharing ('good news to the poor'), political freedom ('release to the captives'), cultural awareness ('recovery of sight to the blind') and social equality ('letting the oppressed go...') – Lk 4:17-18. And the church's mission today as always can be none other than that of Jesus, the prophet, and it is truly the church of Christ only when it carries out its role as 'a prophet to the nations.'

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### Endnotes

1. Max Weber, "The Rutinization of Charisma," in *Theories of Society* ed. by Talcot Parsons and others (New York: Free Press, 1965), 1297.
2. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 46ff.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 7.
4. Richard Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global church: A People called and Sent* (Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 6.
5. Ibid, 7.
6. Ibid, 178.
7. Sean McDonagh, "Faithful Critics", *The Tablet* (14.04.2012), 12-13; Edward Butler, "A Voice No Longer Heard," *The Tablet* (14.04.2012), 16.
8. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 122-3.
9. Ibid, 138
10. Richard Gaillardetz, 18.
11. Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 1993), 231ff.
12. Richard Horsley, *Sociology and Jesus Movement* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 109-11.

13. Norman Kraus as cited in Stephen Bevans & Roger Schroeder, *Christians in Context: A Theology of Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2005), 355.
14. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate)*, Encyclical Letter, 7 Dec. 1990. no.44
15. Stephen Bevans & Roger Schroeder, *Christians in Context*, 383-4.
16. Richard Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 166.