

Some Anglican Distinctives in the Cross-hairs of the Prophetic Imagination

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This brief article was written originally for our local parish magazine in response to the ministry of a prominent Australian pastor at a recent parish camp. Since this reflection is concerned with a theme of wider appeal, I have uploaded it here after some minor changes.

Our guest speaker had addressed us on the theme “The Forgotten Jesus”. During his talks, he had drawn attention to a book he had found helpful in bringing together the ministry of Jesus and the contemporary realities of our society, Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*. Naturally, he had exhorted us to read it. If you haven't yet, here are some highlights together with closing reflections of my own.

The author looks back on a long and fruitful academic career as one of world's foremost Old Testament scholars and biblical commentators. An ordained minister and prolific writer, he has authored fifty eight books and over one hundred articles.

The opening line of the Preface reveals Brueggemann's agenda: “The time may be ripe in the church for serious consideration of prophecy as a crucial element in ministry.”

To understand what Brueggemann is up to, the reader must follow him through a series of biblical studies into the pathos, the grief, the heart cry, and the public mind of some Old Testament prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos. And it is in the unfolding of the *prophetic imagination* that we discover the book's ticking clock. By prophetic imagination Brueggemann means the formation of an “alternative consciousness” to that of the dominant culture.

Too many people in church life today, he argues, are deeply committed to a consciousness that is unable to imagine real historical newness. We tend to ask first whether newness is politically practical or economically feasible. But this mentality surrenders everything to the ruling consciousness before we even start. For the prophetic imagination, by contrast, all that matters is whether it is imaginable, not whether it is practical. Imagination comes before implementation.

But imagination is dangerous. Like poetry, it tends to subvert the status quo. Therefore, totalitarian regimes hate and suppress it; and so do tradition-bound cultures and religious groups.

Hence the criticisms of the prophets were more than social protest. While they were concerned with change, even fundamental change in society, they aimed higher. They wanted to dismantle the public consciousness that was responsible for the status quo through the “distinctive power of language”. They possessed the capacity to speak in ways that evoked “newness” in the hearer. And, we are now learning, that when and where “such language stops we find our humanness diminished”, writes Brueggemann.

The aim of his book is to link effectively the prophetic ministry with the contemporary situation of the church. This confrontation, he says, is one of the central tasks facing the ministry today.

While raising an alternative consciousness has always been the task of the church, it is the condition of the church that will determine its effectiveness. On this score Brueggemann notes: "The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act."

This remark expresses more than any other Brueggemann's grief that the church in America has allowed the dominant culture to domesticate the prophetic voice. Instead of confronting culture, the church mimics it. And so pervasive are these forces that they are threatening the church's identity, even to the abandonment of true faith.

Only a spiritually empowered church is able to contradict the dominant consciousness of culture and threaten to dismantle it. But, says Brueggemann, the church will remain powerless until it recovers for itself this alternative consciousness as the primal path of escape from the clutches of consumerism. The church has therefore no more pressing business than to re-appropriate its authenticity and power. In other words, the church must bring the claims of the prophetic tradition into an effective encounter with the forces of culture in its own ranks or face the prospect of being weakened by them.

What does this mean in practice?

First, the prophetic ministry must evoke an alternative community. Then, it must be integrated with all dimension of church life – counselling, preaching, liturgy, education – developing a posture that contradicts the world and brings light into every context. Next, through lament, anguish and the sharing of pain, the prophetic ministry must penetrate the numbness and apathy of the prevailing consciousness. Finally, recognizing that grief and praise are the principal ways of prophetic criticism, these need to be applied more intentionally in our age.

What hinders us, says Brueggemann, is our own unsureness of how the prophetic ministry will be received and whether the old way is not the better path anyway. After all, we are all as bourgeois and obdurate as the next person.

By contrast, prophetic ministers and communities are only worthy of the name, when they themselves are actively engaged in the struggle of being a counter-community. And what alternative is there anyway? To be the church of Jesus Christ, we must enter the fray or cease being the church. Remaining passive towards the consumer culture is deadly.

At this point, let me add a few reflections of my own.

In the thirty years since the book first appeared the pandemic of consumerism has spread like swine flu, and the Australian church has not been immune to the contagion. If then the prophetic ministry as outlined above is the cure to cultural contamination, we Anglicans face a particular question: are we culturally preconditioned to hear or to miss the prophetic call? In another way, are some of our Anglican distinctives working for or against an imagination that is able break out of the overarching consciousness of the status quo? What about our penchant for taking always the safe "middle ground"? Or our allegiance to the

British Crown, our close ties to the state, the military and the establishment?

To my mind, these traditional associations with the symbols of worldly power are inimical to the emergence of genuine historical newness. But if this is the case, how will the Anglican Church become an authentic counter-society? Is not the steady decline in membership a sign, not of an uncompromising prophetic stance but of an unimaginative conservatism? What about the decline in our inter-generational relevance? Is it perhaps that “our screws are too tight” for the next generation?

These are not just rhetorical questions. If I have understood our guest speaker correctly, they are examples of the kind of soul searching he was seeking to evoke in exhorting us to rediscover the forgotten Jesus, who is the inversion of all natural criteria of society and culture.

In closing, Brueggemann's writing is not for the faint-hearted at any time. *The Prophetic Imagination* shows us the awesomeness of the choice we face in embracing the prophetic ministry as Jesus embodied it. Who is sufficient for these things?