

Experiencing God.

Jeremiah 1. 4 - 10; Hebrews 13. 18 - end; Luke 13. 10-17.

Earlier this week, I came on an announcement of an archaeological find in Northern Galilee. A team from Japan have been investigating a site named Tel Rechesh, a farm complex near Nazareth, over a number of summers. This year they have confirmed the identification of a synagogue from the first century, the first such to be found in a rural area. The building was about eight metres wide and 9 metres high – one of the two supporting pillars has survived. The walls were lined with stone benches, a distinctive feature of the synagogues already found in towns.

The synagogue would have been a place for meeting, reading the Torah scrolls, teaching. While the Temple still stood it would not have been a place of worship, though after the destruction of the temple a liturgy of prayer developed for synagogues, the beginnings of the forms used to this day in Judaism.

One can imagine the small community gathering on the Sabbath, seated on the stone benches around the walls; presumably children would have filled the floor space. The elected leader would have invited people to read and to speak; to give a sermon if you like. If there was a local scholar or Pharisee he would have been called on first; indeed the pattern of a sermon is a largely pharisaic development, with plenty of story-telling and a leaven of law or practice. It is impressive that small communities kept Torah scrolls; animal skins to write on are costly, hand copying is time consuming and therefore also costly.

And in such small synagogues Jesus was, by the gospel accounts, a welcome visitor and speaker.

In today's gospel reading a woman appears. The separate seating or even screening of women was a later development; at this time women were not separated nor excluded; there are even some inscriptions referring to women as leaders of synagogues. But this particular woman was distressingly disabled, bent over and unable to straighten up, unable to see anything but the ground, and the wording suggests that this was taken to be the effect of an evil spirit.

It is not recorded that she asks for healing, but Jesus grants it, says even that it is necessary that she be healed, as if the kingdom of God is breaking into the world and must release captives. And despite the discussion about Sabbath healing – the congregation rejoices and praises God, acknowledging that the power of God has been felt.

Do we expect to be disturbed, challenged, by the power of God when we come together in church, as well as uplifted, inspired, comforted. Can we really dare to expect to meet God?

The description of the initial call of Jeremiah to the role of prophet is another example of God's presence or action being experienced. The young priest reacts to the divine call, perhaps appropriately, with a sense of inadequacy, (I am but a boy) but is firmly reassured that words will be given him, that he will be told what to say, and to whom, and that God's presence will protect him – by implication there may be trouble ahead. We are not told how the call came – did the young man experience a vision, a voice, was he at prayer or during temple worship? We are not told. It is recorded that Jeremiah's ministry began during the reign of the reforming king Josiah, who was well spoken of in the second book of Kings. Perhaps the voice of prophecy was needed to inspire or explain the king's reforms to worship and the re instatement of Torah practice. In later reigns, after Josiah's death, Jeremiah's warnings were little regarded, and eventually the kingdom of Judah is overrun, the temple and city of Jerusalem destroyed, people taken into exile in Babylon.

Does prophecy continue to this day? There is a strand of thought that prophecy has ceased from the world. But a biography of Archbishop William Temple was subtitled "Prophet of God". Temple was certainly a brilliant and devout disturber of the status quo. He was a card-carrying member of the Labour party, (who remembers the old tag of the C of E being the Tory party at prayer?) and during the first world war was pleased to announce that he was on a Scotland Yard watch list, apparently on the strength of his support for the Workers Education Association. Temple looked at disestablishment of the Church of England, especially after the revised prayer book was refused by Parliament in the 1920s. He noted a woman with effectively a calling to serve as a priest, and acknowledged the validity of her calling, but felt that nothing could be done about it.

Would Desmond Tutu count as a prophet? Or the present pope, who sees and argues for change to the Roman Catholic Church, without necessarily being able to enforce it? Are there people we know who have the gift of identifying (or being shown) new directions we should take? Or who have the hard gift of Jeremiah, of seeing and speaking about shortcomings and failures?

The book of Hebrews, probably an extended message to a group of Christians of a Jewish background, or Jewish sympathies, is dense and hard to follow. When the Bible Reading Fellowship notes covered the book earlier this year, in two weeks, I felt a sense that the detail was probably beyond us, or at least beyond the available time, but the notes picked out a tremendous message. Certainly the variety of translations suggests that the text is hard to pin down. On the other hand another commentary suggests that the document is closely reasoned, the result of deep thought and using the best techniques of argument and persuasion, to encourage the group addressed to hold to and fully understand their faith. On this basis, the section read to us today is the summary and conclusion of the argument, linking back to the opening sections comparing the two covenants or relationships, that given to Moses, with terrifying physical phenomena on Mount Sinai, and that initiated by Christ, and talking of the exalted Christ in heaven, and about the role of angels. It has a

picture of the new heavenly Jerusalem, and concludes gloriously with an invitation to offer our share in the worship, in gratitude.

Three readings today, three pictures of meeting with, encountering, God. There is the synagogue meeting for discussion and learning, applying scripture to daily life – and Jesus the itinerant preacher comes and the kingdom breaks in miraculously.

6 centuries earlier there is the young man Jeremiah, of priestly family and destined for the ordered life of the priesthood, who instead receives a personal calling to a much less settled service as a prophet, a disturber of the peace. And there is the call in Hebrews to understand ourselves as a heavenly priesthood, renewing and the reconciling the world, particularly in our observance of the Eucharist, and joining with all who have gone before us.

Describing an individual encounter with God is barely possible; Mother Julian of Norwich, the medieval nun, thought and prayed and meditated for 20 years before she committed anything of her visions to paper.

But some people seem to experience the presence of God through other people, through community. Others have a definite internal and private experience. Others feel the presence most intensely through the Eucharist, and that is partly why any change to the detail of the service can be hard to assimilate. And some do not seem to have a particular experience at all, and yet continue to believe and to serve. An example might be found in the writings of Karen Armstrong, who entered a strict Catholic order of nuns, expecting to find God, but found no experience of him.

Let us end with that picture of the small synagogue in the hills of Galilee, the local people gathered to read and to learn, and Jesus comes in and speaks to them. What do they hear, and what difference does it make to their lives?

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