

‘When listening prophets dare to speak’ by Dan Damon (*Singing the Faith* 163)

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When listening prophets dare to speak,
love thunders like an ocean wave,
old wineskins burst, stone columns quake,
and dry bones rise up from the grave.

When prophets feel their strength is gone,
as Churches add to people’s pain,
a prophet’s question lingers on,
‘Can dry bones ever live again?’

True prophets challenge us to change,
to wake and wonder, risk and grow,
and when the way ahead seems strange,
to name the fear and let it go.

God bids us rise to speak and move
like prophets on a lighted stage,
unmasking fear, revealing love,
and making peace from age to age.

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‘Listening’ prophets? It’s a striking phrase with which Dan Damon begins his hymn. He is writing, after all, about men and women who live most vividly in the biblical texts and our imaginations by what they say and do than for their listening skills. We recall the stories of Elijah battling it out with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel; of Jeremiah smashing clay pots to make a point; of Deborah, the military leader; and Hosea reclaiming his errant wife.

But they listen, too. And is that not, surely, the hardest part of the prophetic task? They listen to a still, small voice (Elijah again); to angelic beings (Isaiah, Ezekiel); but mostly to the cries and experiences of those who live around them, and the intents of aggressor nations. But in all their visions and assessments, we understand that the Hebrew prophets expressed an astute understanding of divine frustration, patience and hope. In the messiness of life and politics, what they focussed on and heard most clearly was God’s voice. In submitting to be God’s mouthpieces, they were seen (often later rather than sooner) to have Yahweh’s hand resting upon them.

We should be curious, then, that among those prophets to whom this hymn alludes (Ezekiel envisioning a valley of dry bones; Jesus himself pointing out the inherent flaws of old wineskins), Dan draws our attention to one man that the Old Testament doesn’t even name as a prophet: Samson.

The stone columns quaking in response to the prophetic voice suggest the toppling of cities and temples so often foreseen by Israel’s wise men, but it’s hard not to imagine also the two pillars that Samson hauls down on top of himself, taking out three thousand Philistines with him.

And though time and again we read about the sinking despair of prophets who feel that no-one is listening to them, nowhere is the loss of strength seen more clearly than when the terrifying slayer of lions and enemies is shorn of his hair and his physical power.

So we are required to ask in what sense Samson listened to God. Indeed, in what sense, if any, was he prophetic? Arguably, he entirely ignores his monastic-like vows as a Nazarite, symbolic of a life given over to Yahweh. Yet continually throughout his story he turns to God to ask for help and strength – and he receives it. The womanizer and vengeful murderer has about him a power that speaks of God's presence – of Yahweh's hand resting on his shoulder. Despite himself, Samson represents a divine intent that he himself doesn't understand.

As the Israeli writer David Grossman puts it, 'Samson contains a secret, a mystery, but he also often "lives that mystery badly"'.

It's this secret that Dan Damon encourages us to reflect upon, pulling our understanding of the prophetic life out of history into our contemporary context. Nothing about this hymn sits in the past tense; it's all about now.

God bids us rise to speak and move
like prophets on a lighted stage.

We, too, have been gifted a mystery; we contain within our lives God's love and care. We, too, live that mystery badly at times. That's our confession. But however badly we live the mystery and how little we understand it, nevertheless it is not for us to creep into the shadows or to hide behind locked doors. Rather, we can be prophet-like if we name our fears and move beyond them; listening hard for God's voice in the cries and experiences of those who live around us, and challenging individuals and institutions whose actions counter God's love.

Where Dan perhaps surprises us is in his declaration that the Church itself may require to be challenged; that our own structures, like rigid immovable pillars, may need to be questioned and even, can we imagine it?, be pulled down. When 'Churches add to people's pain, a prophet's question lingers on, 'Can dry bones ever live again?'

In recent times, many within the LGBTQ community have known pain as a result of decisions made by the worldwide Anglican community, but we know that the ability of the institutional Church to appear, despite itself, unthinking and unloving is not new. We can, and often do, value self-preservation and the husks of tradition over sacrificial love.

Dan Damon's call to reveal love and to make "peace from age to age" speaks to us as nothing less than a cry for prophetic Christian listeners, even if it leads us to challenge the structures under which we have sheltered for so long.

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