

God's Power in Death

KATHLEEN RUSHTON notes that the prophets spoke out against injustice and offered alternative visions of life for their communities. She describes this prophetic imagination in the crucifixion of Jesus in Mark 14:1 – 15:47.

I found scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* inspiring when I first read it. He wrote that the prophetic task is "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us". As Christians, we are called to be faithful to our alternative vocation which can be co-opted and domesticated by that dominant culture. Brueggemann explains how the prophets, and later Jesus, lived this alternative vocation in two interlinked steps: first, their words and actions offer *criticism* of the dominant culture, and second, in ways that provoke amazement which *energises* people to make changes to bring about God's alternative world in their context.

Prophetic Imagination

We are called to read biblical texts as acts of imagination which offer us God's alternative ways of seeing and understanding our world. They can raise our consciousness to the workings of our society which oppress, dispossess or privilege particular groups. Brueggemann says that a culture which is entrenched in and demanding of conformity and allows no alternative is one of "totalism".

Moses's story is of a prophet critiquing Pharaoh's totalistic culture which enslaved the Hebrews. Moses offered an alternative – a culture of covenant with God governed by politics of justice and compassion. He laid out God's new call to the people to be an alternative social reality and community. Their walk through the Red Sea is an image of their break from oppression to freedom.

Jesus's Imagination of God's Reign

The prophetic tradition culminates

in the new call of God made flesh in Jesus. Jesus's ministry energises and leads to radical new beginnings. He criticises distortions and acts in new ways that upset the established order of doing things (Mk 3:22). We read how those around Jesus "were all amazed" at this "new teaching" (Mk 1:27; 4:41; 6:2) and are "astonished" (Mk 6:51; 7:37).

Jesus's coming interrupted life. He announced the reign of God (Mk 1:15) and forgave sin (Mk 2:1-11) and evoked amazement (Mk 2:12). He healed on the Sabbath (Mk 3:1-6); ate with outcasts (Mk 2:15-17); reached out to the "unclean" (Mk 7:24-30) and to sinners (Mk 2:1-12). His actions challenged the political hegemony. Those living in Roman controlled land understood the political significance of Jesus exorcising the Gerasene's demons called "legion" (Mk 5:1-13). He was critical of the Temple's governance and spoke openly about its destruction (Mk 11:15-19). He was compassionate towards those pushed to the margins of society by those in power (Mk 6:34). He named the oppressors. And the people were amazed and also energised by the new possibilities for life he showed them.

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Crucifixion of Jesus

The crucifixion of Jesus can be understood as an extreme rejection of totalism. Jesus died because he lived according the ways of God's alternative world. As Brueggemann says Jesus's death on the cross announces that "the power of God takes the form of death".

We can discern the radical criticism embodied in the crucifixion in the passion announcements: Jesus will suffer, be rejected because of his insistence on God's way, die and rise again (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). The power of God takes the form of death, and true well-being and victory only appear through death. Every form of self-serving power upon which totalism is based is undermined by Jesus's realisation that the "Son of Humanity must suffer" to bring about the reign of God.

This new insight is so extraordinary that it bewilders the disciples. Peter rejects it as too radical and Jesus rebukes him (Mk 8:32-33). The other disciples do not understand but are afraid to ask Jesus to explain (Mk 9:32). Their misunderstanding leads to them disputing who among them has greater authority and power (Mk 10:35-37).

The Words from the Cross

The words of Jesus on the cross are the voice of an alternative consciousness, one in which death is powerful. But Jesus suffers: in Mark 15:34, we hear Jesus's cry of despair – an announcement of abandonment. Old assurances are all gone. In and with Jesus, God suffers and mourns in solidarity with those who suffer.

Prophetic Imagination Today

The prophetic imagination is about proclaiming God's alternative world by imagining a better, more just future. A rejection of totalism – the great hegemonic force that works to maintain the status quo no matter what – requires us not only to deconstruct dominant culture but to rebuild our society to be more just. Like the biblical prophets, all Christians are to uncover injustice, then act justly themselves, and work to promote ways that ensure justice for all members of society.

The celebration of Waitangi Day imaged for us in Aotearoa relationships between Māori, Pakeha and other groups that promote truth, justice, equality, responsibility and love. Systemic racism is being changed by the influence of prophetic women and men who have raised our consciousness of the injustices embedded in our country and offered new ways of thinking and acting.

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We know society is working together for the good of all. During Lockdowns we collaborated – state and people – to save lives and work for the common good. But in other times, we need prophetic voices to warn us away from a dangerous path.

Nine powerful countries still have nuclear weapons at the vanguard of their security arrangements. Prophetic voices within New Zealand – Larry Ross, David Lange, Harold Evans, Kate Dewes and many others – have imagined a nuclear free future and have been working to bring it about. New Zealand passed the Nuclear Free Act in 1987. Nuclear weapons which have always been immoral are now illegal under international law because on 22 January 2021 the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, signed by 50 countries, has come into

effect. Signatories agree to prohibit nuclear weapons and work towards their total elimination.

Our challenge is to be always alert to the need to bring justice to all parts of our society, and to be prepared for this to sometimes take radical forms: there may be life in death. And we will need to maintain our hope in the face of what may feel like abandonment. The task is twofold: on the one hand, we


will need to maintain a consciousness sufficiently separate from the "dominant culture" as to cast a critical eye on it; and on the other hand, we will need to be energised and accept our responsibility as a part of culture in order to bring about justice in it.

We hope that we will, together, imagine a new and better future, and that we all play a part in this. We can and must respond creatively to the "summons to profound interior conversion ... and ecological conversion" (*Laudato Si'* par 217) – ready to consider new, alternative ways of doing things. Individually and together, living according to our alternative vocation, we can make a difference. ✨

28 March
Mark 14:1-15:47 – RL Passion Sunday
RCL Liturgy of the Passion



Fruit, Herbal, Black, Green, Earl Grey, Chai, Rooibos,

Organic, Gifts ... Vintage China 

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