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Delighted to be here on behalf of the Scottish Episcopal Church – persistent Anglicans in Scotland – reduced to what Sir Walter Scott called the ‘shadow of a shade’

In the series of sermons which begins this evening, we think about prophecy. You may naturally relate that to various American tele-evangelists who offer confirmed dates for the end of the world and then have some awkward explaining to do when it doesn’t happen. The current best estimate – which arises from Mayan prophecy is December 21, 2012.

But we’re thinking here about a phenomenon which is of much more fundamental importance – and much more costly. Jesus says, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ But note Luke’s comment before Jesus speaks that ‘he began to teach … and was praised by everybody.’ Even after he has spoken, Luke reports that ‘all spoke well of him’. Yet Jesus himself says, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.’

For me – as you can hear from the thread of Irish accent in the way I speak – prophetic ministry is one of the key components of ministry. Indeed it may explain why I find myself in Scotland and no longer in Ireland. Prophets speak – they call people to repentence – they tell people how they have strayed from God’s way and his covenant – they demand justice for the weak and the oppressed. They speak without thought for the consequences. They speak because they feel that they have no option – they speak because they must. They speak outside consensus. They have no interest in explanations of how things got to be the way they are. They are unimpressed by statements about ‘what we all think’ or ‘what all right-thinking people believe’

We had a good example of it last week. Archbishop Rowan Williams made a visit to the Province of Central Africa of the Anglican Church. In Zimbabwe, in the Diocese of Harare ….

There were many reasons why he should not make such a visit. The risk of personal violence was one – the risk of his visit being exploited by President Robert Mugabe was another.

So the Archbishop of Canterbury stood up in a sports stadium in Harare in front of a crowd of 15000 people and this is what he said.

*You know how those who by their greed and violence have refused the grace of God try to silence your worship and frustrate your witness in the churches and schools and hospitals of this country. But you also know what Jesus' parable teaches us so powerfully – that the will of God to invite people to his feast is so strong that it can triumph even over these mindless and Godless assaults. Just as the Risen Jesus breaks through the locked doors of fear and suspicion, so he continues to call you and empower you in spite of all efforts to defeat you.*

It is of course entirely reasonable to say that it is easy to do this in Zimbabwe. After all the issues are starkly clear. I remember feeling the same about Archbishop Desmond Tutu who stood up in Soweto and said ‘Let my people go.’

It’s harder to be prophetic when you are the group which feels itself to be losing and is convulsed with grief about loss of privilege or identity, imagined or otherwise. For me, Mandela and Tutu are personal heroes – but listen to this. Beyers Naude was an up-and-coming minister of the Dutch Reformed Church – a young man with a great future. But he gradually found it impossible to continue to be a defender of apartheid – particularly after the Sharpeville Shooting in 1960. He confided to his wife that he felt that he could no longer in conscience continue with his ministry. As spouses sometimes uncomfortably do, she suggested to him that he should act in accordance with his conscience. So he preached his last sermon, went to the back of the church and laid down his preaching gown. His congregation filed past him and not one greeted him. He subsequently became a member of the ANC and an anti-apartheid activist of great renown.

And finally it seems to me to be particularly difficult to achieve the clarity which is characteristic of prophetic speech in today’s secular society. Almost by definition, faith speaks from the margins. And there are confusions. A secular society should be tolerant and possibly even open – but it is not particularly interested in concepts of justice. We need to think about whether agendas which are about the asserting of rights are the same thing as agendas about justice for the weak.

But for all those complexities and confusions, I have to say that it is in prophetic utterance that the church and faith groups do engage best with society. And that is because they are speaking not about the church but about the world and its issues. And it is because it is costly – and people pay attention when they perceive that something is costly.

Most of all, I think that in a world of moral confusion and of manifest injustice in for example the gaps between rich and poor across the world and in our own society, this prophetic speaking is what we are called to be and to do.