



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany 28th January 2024

Prepare the Way by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ Then the Lord replied to me, ‘They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. (Deut 18:15-22)

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

God is still speaking, and we are still listening.

Teaching with authority

Here's a question for you: when you read something on social media, or the news, or hear something from a politician or leader in society – *how do you know it's true?* It's a question that's almost become something of a cliché in our day and age, especially in our post-Trump world.

We now live with “alternative truths”, “misinformation” (information that is misleading or false), “disinformation” (information that is *intentionally* misleading for malicious purposes). The words have become part of our everyday lexicon. There is an ever-present need for vigorous “fact-checking” by the media.

And even the media – which is supposed to keep politicians and other leaders honest – is increasingly charged with accusations of ideological bias from both sides of the political aisle. Consequently, politicians can increasingly what say they want because the media tasked with critiquing them is itself being discredited. Who is the arbiter of truth anymore?

All this to say, that the common foundation of trust on which our society is built is actively being eroded. It feels like there is less common ground on which to even have meaningful conversation about issues that matter to us.

The reason I ask the question is because it emerges from our reading from Deuteronomy. God, we're told, will raise up a prophet like Moses, a leader among the people, who will speak the truth of God's word to them and who will lead them into God's future.

But the question immediately arises: *how do we know this prophet when we see them? How do we know if they're speaking truth or falsehood? Or to put in today's lingo: how do we know these words aren't just disinformation and “alternative truths”?* How can we trust what's being said? A question that has enduring relevance today.

Now, the Deuteronomy passage is talking specifically about *prophetic* words that predict a future that is being crafted by God. And therefore, there's a simple test to work out whether these prophetic words are true or false: does the prophecy come to pass?

...or was it just the bad chicken they ate the night before speaking?

Simple test, right? Well, yes. But also no.

You have probably all heard of the term “self-fulfilling prophecy”. A “self-fulfilling prophecy” is a belief that influences our behaviours thus causing the belief to come true. It's a reminder that the relationship between our words and reality is somewhat more complex than our Deuteronomy reading suggests.

Our beliefs, our words, shape the way we see the world, what we expect from the world, how we behave in the world. And in this way, words have an astonishing creative power. With words, we can speak realities into existence. In the beginning was the Word...

Politicians, journalists, and other leaders, like church pastors, have immense power because of the position they hold in the community. Their statements have a prophetic power to shape views, behaviours, narratives in profound ways ... for better or for worse.

For instance, if you're in a position of power and you speak words that stir up suspicion or fear towards particular groups in society, then you shouldn't be surprised if, like fuel to a

fire, that suspicion and fear bursts to life, drawing out people's worst instincts and increasing division and generating vitriol, violence, and hate.

(As an aside, because of this, I'm acutely aware of the power that I have as a minister that comes with the opportunity to speak to you every week. It's a power I don't take lightly and I hope you will keep me accountable.)

All of this to say, that there is a complex relationship between the world in here (point to head) and the world out there. It's not a simple one-way street, where reality is objective and unchanging and our words simply describe it. The two are in constant interaction as we live in, respond to, and engage with the world. Our words and beliefs have creative power.

And if that's true, then it's not enough to wait and see if something comes to pass to determine whether it's true or not. After all, if you prophesy violence and think violent thoughts and act violently... then the prophecy will fulfill itself. But that doesn't mean it's "of God".

No, a second test is needed. And that test is to look at the *effect* of our words. What is the effect of our words on others? What *sort* of future is it inviting us into?

In our gospel reading today, there's no question that Jesus passes the first test of whether his words come to pass or not. In Mark's Gospel, there's a recurring theme: when Jesus speaks *stuff happens*. Not in fifty years, or nine months, or twelve hours. No, when Jesus speaks, stuff happens immediately *there* and *then*. It's Mark's way of saying that Jesus is *the* Prophet par excellence. He speaks not merely as a messenger of God's Word. He speaks with the very authority of God's Word – *as if he were God*.

And if that's true... if Jesus is the Prophet par excellence who speaks with the very authority of God, then it means that the effect of Jesus' words and actions are also giving us a clear picture of what God's coming future is like. It's as if the veil is being lifted and we're seeing God's Kingdom with immediate clarity.

So what is this future like? Well, we heard today that it's a future where those who are enslaved by demonic forces are liberated, those who are marginalised and treated with suspicion are brought back into the fold. If you keep reading Mark's Gospel, you come across story after story like it. Stories of people being healed from illness, restored to relationship, revived in body, soul or mind... the effect of Jesus' words, in short, is life and life in fullness. Life freed from fear and all that oppresses and excludes. That's the future that God is bringing into existence.

I want to suggest in light of our reading today that one of the criteria, if not the criterion, for what is true and good and "of God" is to ask, *what is the effect of these words being spoken?*

Do the words stir up fear, suspicion, and division? Do they employ inflammatory rhetoric that indulge our worst instincts? Do they place blame on others?

Conversely, do the words we hear or read build trust, dispel fears, and encourage generosity of spirit towards others? Do they build bridges and assume the best in people? Do they foster dialogue across difference?

In short, for us as followers of Jesus, are the words we hear (in the media, on facebook, from our politicians) consistent with the future we see coming to birth in Jesus Christ? Do they bring us closer to fullness of life for all, especially to those on the margins of society? Or do they bring us further away?

I know it's hardly ever a cut-and-dry case. That's why being a disciple of Jesus is a life-long endeavour. We're constant learning and discerning together what it means to follow Jesus faithfully in our day and age. But that's the task before us.

I want to finish with a topical example. As you know, the Waitangi Day celebrations are coming up. But this year things feel particularly tense due to the public conversation arising from competing views about the meaning and interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi. There is much anger. There is much suspicion. It feels like battle lines are being drawn and things could easily escalate. And it's so hard to know in all of this what is true at this time of competing narratives and conflicting agendas.

So how do we know what is true? I was struck by a speech that I heard last week from the Anglican Archbishop Don Tamihere. Tamihere had been invited by the Māori King Tuheitia to address the recent national hui at Tūrangawaewae Marae, where approximately 10,000 people were gathered as a show of unity. And there Tamihere exhorted the people gathered to commit to aroha, to love, in spite of whatever they were feeling.

"And why?" he said. "Why do we turn to aroha [to love]? Because this kaupapa [reason why we've gathered] is not for us. It's for our children and our children's children. Our [children] and our [children's children] are watching us. They are watching the way we interact. They are watching the way that we will speak and [discuss] together. They are watching the way we choose to act. It's been said that our children will never listen to us, but they will never fail to imitate us."

It's been said that our children will never listen to us, but they will never fail to imitate us.

Prophetic words to be heard by us all as we navigate this difficult conversation as a country. Tamihere invites us to contemplate the effect of our words and actions. The future we are creating. If our children imitate us, then our future as a nation will reflect our words and actions now. They will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They will become true.

So, how do we know if a word is true and good and of God? The answer is simple: if its fruit is aroha, love, then it is of God. Amen.