

# Sunday 16th June 2024 - That's The Spirit! : Prophecy

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[ 0 : 00 ] Just to kick off really, and I mean that word advisedly, you'll know, if you know me at all, you'll know that I do like my football. And tonight we see England kicking off their tournament with, yeah, against Serbia tonight.

8pm down the Vic, although other pubs are available, of course, for that match. But I think with England, as tends to be our custom as a country, we're going into this tournament with more than just a hint of optimism that this might finally be our year.

Yes, we haven't won a tournament for, what, 58 years now. And yes, England's defence is a bit dodgy. And yes, we lost to Iceland last week. But with a fantastic forward line, including this guy, West Ham's Jarrod Bowen, of course, as well, bringing home the trophy, well, it's not an impossibility, shall we say, this year.

Indeed, some bookies have even made England favourites to win the tournament. So the prediction of bookmakers, at least, is glory for England.

Now, we know England are going to go out on penalties, aren't they? At some stage, that's par for the course. But whether you're a betting person or not, this whole prediction thing is an immensely popular pastime.

[ 1 : 22 ] Indeed, this fascination with making predictions, it goes far beyond sport and has become part and parcel of our everyday life. So if we think about it, it covers everything from next week's weather to next month's general election, from models of climate change to working out perhaps our overall life expectancy.

You know, they're all examples of things which kind of entice us in to think about in a predictive kind of way, predictions about what might happen.

All of which is very understandable, I think. You know, I guess we generally like to have an idea about what's coming up, because predicting the future, of course, helps us to plan, helps us to make decisions in life, helps us to prepare for what's approaching.

In fact, I suggest that this desire to understand the future is often the main association we have with what I'd like us to think about today as part of our That's the Spirit series, which is this word, prophecy.

Prophecy. Now, if you look up the word prophecy in the dictionary, it says something like this. It says a prediction of what will happen in the future. And that's certainly one way of defining what prophecy is, a prediction of what will happen.

[ 2 : 50 ] And so as we read the Bible, there are various prophets, usually depicted as old men with some pretty serious beards here.

Think of a cross between Dumbledore and Gandalf, that kind of fella going on, you know. We might assume, therefore, because they're called prophets, that the message of these prophets is all about predicting what will happen.

In fact, in terms of thinking about God's Holy Spirit, you know, this personal presence of God with us, prophecy is therefore often seen as being what we might call divinely inspired insight into what will actually happen in the future.

It's like a sneak preview, a trailer, if you like, of an already decided future. And so the words of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and so on, their predictions of either doom and gloom on the one hand or abundant blessings on the other, they're often taken as read because we assume that's what prophets do.

They tell us now about what things will be like in the future. Except do they? Do they? Is that the role of prophets?

[ 4 : 14 ] Because what I'd like us to explore this morning is the way in which prophecy seems to work in the Bible and then see how those same principles might shape the way we listen to and engage with God through the Spirit in our lives today.

So let's start, for example, with a passage from a book named after one of the main prophets in the Bible, this guy, Jeremiah, who we'll be told was a pretty gloomy fella, if you've read his 50-something chapters of the book named after him.

Jeremiah lived about 600 BC, just outside Jerusalem. And that was a time when people had increasingly turned against God's ways and embraced evil.

And we're talking proper evil here, you know, resorting to child sacrifice and all sorts of other abhorrent behaviours.

And so Jeremiah, no wonder he was gloomy because he spent so much of his time passionately warning them about the consequences of their behaviour and desperately calling them to turn back to God.

[ 5 : 26 ] And because he was a prophet, he was predicting that if they didn't, they were heading for destruction. For example, Jeremiah shared prophecies like this.

He said at one point, he said, This is what the sovereign Lord says. My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land. And it will burn and not be quenched. And yet, despite these kind of predictive prophecies, as we might call them, what we also see in the book of Jeremiah is that not every prophecy necessarily comes true.

Indeed, Jeremiah and others often seem to share these pictures as a kind of best or worst case scenario in order to provoke people into action.

In fact, it seems that even after a prophet like Jeremiah might predict God's blessings or hear God's curses on people, God still reserves the right to change course.

[ 6 : 42 ] For example, on one occasion, Jeremiah senses God telling him to visit a potter who was working at a wheel in his house.

Jeremiah sees him making a clay pot, only the clay pot wasn't turning out so well. So Jeremiah watched the potter take the same clay, kind of mash it up a bit, and start again, remoulding and reworking the clay into a new, better pot.

And as he watched this potter sort of reworking this clay in action. So Jeremiah shares this. He says, Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does, declares the Lord.

Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. At any time, I can announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed.

But if that nation, I warned, repents of its evil, I will change my mind and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

[ 7 : 55 ] At another time, I may declare that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted. But if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good I had intended to do for it.

In other words, God's predictions or plans for people seem to be very much dependent on what they do.

You know, God, we're told, can change his mind in response to people's behavior. And so the future, it seems, is not set in stone by a prophecy, but rather is like clay, you know, shaped by whether people follow God's ways or not.

We could say, therefore, that prophecies are conditional statements. You know, they explain not what has already been decided, rather they explain what will surely happen if a certain path is followed.

So what does all this tell us? Well, I guess we could say that prophecy doesn't simply seek to predict the future, but more importantly, it tries to change how people live in the present.

[ 9 : 21 ] It's essentially, I think, God's way of speaking through people and saying, look, do things your own way. You know, live selfish, greedy lives.

Trample on other people if you wish. But I guarantee you will end up destroying yourselves and others. But put me first. Follow my ways. Be generous.

Seek justice. Show compassion. And I guarantee you that you will discover what it means to live a blessed life. So which is it?

The choice is yours, God effectively says. So prophets lay this choice before people by sharing specific insights that God has given them as to what the future holds.

As we saw, the future is not set in stone, but is instead contingent on whether they, whether we live this way or that way.

[10:18] Jesus talks about it as building a house on rock or building a house on sand. So if that's what I think the Bible shows us prophecy is, then how does it work in practice?

What does it look like day to day? Well, I'd suggest we do well to see prophecy working on at least three levels.

So firstly, I'd suggest we need to approach the whole area of prophecy with this, with humility. You know, especially when it comes to thinking about what the future may or may not hold.

You see, one of the downsides of mistakenly seeing prophecy as predicting what definitely will happen in the future, I think is that it tempts us into putting timescales on things.

And yet, just as God's ways are not our ways, so we're told God's timing is not always our timing as well. Indeed, the writer of 2 Peter, a letter in the New Testament, he puts it best when he says this, that one day is as a thousand years to the Lord and a thousand years as one day.

[11:34] I guess that means, in my understanding, that any talk of the future, you know, that needs to be held very loosely. Particularly any talk of us being, as some people talk about, in the end times or the last days and so on, before Jesus returns.

No one has any idea about those timings, about future stuff. Not even Jesus did, he said. And dwelling on it, I think, suggests, again, this perhaps mistaken view of prophecy as being all about prediction.

Harking back to this idea of wanting to know what's going to happen and when. That's not ours to know. Only God, it seems, knows the timing of things. Yes, we long for people to know Jesus for themselves.

But the motivation for that, and it seems the whole point of prophecy, is that a relationship with Jesus is worth having in the present, in the here and now.

Meaning that we can leave and entrust the future, however long it stretches out for, into the hands of our good and loving God. In fact, just after Peter says this one day is a thousand years stuff, he follows it up by saying the next verse, you know, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise of some count slowness, but he's patient towards you.

[13:03] Not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. The Lord is patient. Patient enough, it seems, to wait for all people to eventually reach a place of repentance.

And that's a truth which I would suggest needs to be held alongside any bleaker pictures of what life lived in opposition to God will lead to.

Secondly, though, and perhaps most importantly, whether it's Old Testament prophets, you know, or prophet like John the Baptist, the way in which Jesus himself was a prophet, or indeed those who we might identify as prophets today, I'd suggest prophecy is primarily concerned with how we live corporately as a society.

What kind of society? Well, most of all, we see God communicating through prophets the importance of caring for the poor, looking out for those in need, and welcoming strangers in our midst.

And often summarized in the Bible as having compassion for widows, orphans, and foreigners. Indeed, when societies fail to look after those who are most in need of help, as was sadly the case with so much of Israel's history in the Bible, God shares his displeasure by speaking through the prophets, outlining the consequences in store for those who choose to neglect God's priorities, but also the blessings for those who are true to his call.

[14:51] So you get prophets like Zechariah saying things like this. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Administer true justice. Show mercy and compassion to one another.

Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Indeed, when people failed in these tasks, again, as Zechariah said, the Lord Almighty was very angry, a righteous anger, we might say, which we also see displayed in Jesus from time to time, when he passionately confronts those who neglect the poor or turn away those in need.

You know, these prophetic principles of justice and generosity, I think I want to say they're non-negotiables when it comes to living life God's way.

Principles which we therefore need to take very seriously as a society, and in particular, take seriously with the kinds of leaders and parties we elect to govern us.

In fact, given the conditional nature of prophecy, if we fail as a nation in this election to prioritize generosity and compassion and justice and the welcome of foreigners and the care for the poor, then really, how can we as a nation honestly seek or expect God's blessing?

[ 16 : 26 ] I'd say the same applies for us at a local level too, even as a church, in that the words of the prophets call us as a community to work at making Burntwood a place of welcome and care of compassion and kindness.

Practically, I think that means when we encounter people throwing out racist or sexist or homophobic remarks, we're duty-bound to challenge them.

When people are critical of or unsympathetic to the pressures faced by those on low income or they stigmatize those on benefits, we educate them.

When we're tempted to keep back more for ourselves than we might need, we instead choose to be generous, cheerful givers. Again, we as a church, we ask God each week to bless us and that's a lovely request to make of God.

But to paraphrase Uncle Ben in Spider-Man, with that blessing comes great responsibility. The responsibility that we might therefore be a blessing with what we ourselves have been blessed.

[ 17 : 41 ] Now, I know there is so much that goes on along these lines already, passing on the blessings that God has given us to others. And that's a privilege to see and it's a privilege to be a part of.

But reading these Old Testament prophets in particular, I wonder if they might just tell us to guard against complacency in this area and instead to keep our eyes on Jesus as the model for and the perfecter of our faith.

But then thirdly, I'd suggest prophecy is also relevant to us on an individual level as well. You see, if we recall the events of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came in power on all God's people, one of these people, the Apostle Peter, he spoke about the way in which God's presence with us was itself fulfilling a prophecy from Old Testament times and a prophet called Joel.

So Peter quoted him at Pentecost with these words. He said, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days and they will prophesy.

[ 19 : 12 ] So the ability to prophesy, to speak the words of insight inspired by God, that's for a whole range of people, young and old, men and women.

And I'd say that means each of us, you know, you and me. Indeed, anyone who relates to God through the presence of the Spirit can have the ability to share divinely inspired words of insight.

How does that work in practice? Well, I think in my experience, these divinely inspired words, they kind of feel different to our usual sort of processes or thinking or reflection.

You know, they feel different. Often, perhaps coming to us very unexpectedly or randomly. And yet they come perhaps with a kind of sense of confidence that they may very well have been planted in our mind by God's Spirit.

Again, you'll have your own understanding of this in your own journey with God. But in my experience, these words seem to come more readily at certain times. You know, particularly when we're praying or worshipping.

[ 20 : 25 ] But for me, they also tend to come very first thing in the morning. You know, almost as if God has sometimes been speaking to me through my dreams. And I wake up with a particular person or situation or need first thought in my head, sort of uppermost in my mind.

And if I remember that and I take that with me, often that's the thing that compels me to do something about that in the day ahead. Now, yeah, I, you know, certainly I, possibly we, won't always be correct in distinguishing what's from us and what's from God.

So if we offer up these words to someone else, you know, I think, I sense God might be saying this to you through me today, perhaps. We always do so asking them to sort of weigh up things for themselves.

But what generally I think seems to be a good marker for whether or not these words are from God is the goodness that lies behind them. So the Apostle Paul, he puts it like this.

He says, follow the way of love and eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. For the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort.

[ 21 : 46 ] The one who prophesies edifies the church. It's a prophecy. Sharing divinely inspired words of insight is designed by nature to strengthen and encourage and comfort and edify, or we might say instruct others.

You know, all words, which are incredibly positive ones, really. They build people up. And so if we think we hear God perhaps telling us to share with someone else that, I don't know, there are no good losers who needs to get a grip or something, it's probably more a reflection of our opinion on that day than something that God would want us to say to them.

However, if it's a positive word of encouragement, yes, that may well be us speaking and our thoughts, but it also may be what God knows that person needs to hear.

So either way, I don't think there's any harm in sharing something which is positive because it might just be a direct word from God as opposed to just our own opinion. I think as well, I just want to say at the moment in this sort of season of church, big church life we're in, I think I get a bit wary these days, even sceptical perhaps, of the ways in which certain churches or conferences seem to have someone up front through whom lots of prophetic words are shared, you know, one individual often. Primarily because I think this local kind of individual kind of prophecy that Paul's talking about is best shared and best discerned within a community and God can easily speak through any of us at any time.

[ 23 : 38 ] What's more, if you've been following the accounts of people damaged by leaders like Mike Pilavachi over the years or just more recently a guy called Gerald Coates, you know, when a prophetic ministry as it's sometimes called, when that's combined with a position that holds significant power and influence and status, then it's open to risks of abuse and control.

Having said that though, and I'll leave us with this, which is much more positive, as Paul says here, prophecy is a gift, it's a freebie from God, it's a spiritual gift that we're told to eagerly desire.

And that means we can ask God for it, which makes sense because we're simply asking the Spirit to enable us to hear God's voice and to share that voice with others so that they might benefit.

Prophecy, when practiced in love and with humility, can only be a good thing. So, perhaps as part of your prayers over the coming days, and if we haven't done so in life already, we might like to ask God to do what we're told, to eagerly desire this gift of prophecy, to equip us with this gift so that the whole church might benefit from God's strengthening, encouraging, comforting, edifying words of love which we are able to share with others.

So that's a scratch of the surface with prophecy. The good news, though, is that through the Spirit, I'd say God is indeed speaking to us all of the time through all sorts of people in all sorts of ways, maybe even through you and through me.

[ 25 : 39 ] So my prayer is that we would have the ears to hear and the wisdom to discern and perhaps most of all the courage to apply the guidance God gives us.

Amen. Amen. Amen.