

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 17, 2009 at 10:07am

The school of prophets

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last weekend in Adelaide, Australia, seventy of us gathered for a retreat entitled "The School of Prophets." The idea was dreamed up by my friend Tim Deslandes as a time for contemplative prayer which would lead us toward prophetic speaking and action.

Tim says the time has become ripe to raise a new generation of "prophetic people," given churchly scandals and failures and worldly horrors and wars.

For my part, I offered reflections on the prophets John the Baptist, Jonah, Isaiah, Mary and Jesus. And during my months of preparation, I lingered over the simple question: what is a prophet? It's a question we seldom hear raised. "It's not something we hear anyone speaking about these days," I was told from a reporter of one of Australia's Catholic papers.

That's particularly strange and sad because the term was so important to Jesus, who clearly trained his disciples as "students of the prophetic way," particularly in his Sermon on the Mount. He admonished them: Rejoice despite almost certain persecution, because you emulate "the prophets of old."

What is a prophet? The prophets were "the most disturbing people who ever lived," Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously penned. The Hebrew word means "to speak for someone else." Adds theologian Megan McKenna in her great book, *Prophets*: "The prophets have no personal spirituality. They live for one thing: the word of God is in their mouths. Their spiritualities are, in a certain sense, the very words that come out of their mouths. Each prophet becomes the message. They embody the word that is to be spoken to this people, at this time, in this place. Their very presence becomes a message in itself."

Daniel Berrigan says a prophet is simply one who speaks the truth to a culture of lies. Philip Berrigan once wrote, "The poor show us who we are and the prophets tell us who we could be, so we hide the poor

and kill the prophets.?

During the weekend, I recalled the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador -- surely great prophets if there ever were -- who spoke of becoming 'a prophetic people,' even 'a prophetic church.' They broke new ground in being persecuted -- and assassinated -- as a community of prophets. I suggested we consider ourselves as members of the global prophetic movement for justice, disarmament and peace. And I offered a dozen points to get us started.

First, a prophet is someone who listens attentively to the word of God, a contemplative, a mystic who hears God and takes God at God's word, and then goes into the world to tell the world God's message. So a prophet speaks fearlessly, publicly God's message, without compromise, despite the times, whether fair or foul.

Second, morning, noon and night, the prophet is centered on God. The prophet does not do his or her own will or speak his or her own message. The prophet does God's will and speaks God's message. Simply put, a prophet is spokesperson for God. God invariably sends the prophet with a word to proclaim. 'Go say to my people: 'Thus says God''? In the process, the prophet tells us who God is and what God wants, and thus, who we are and how we can become fully human.

Third, a prophet interprets the signs of the times. The prophet is concerned with the world, here and now, in the daily events of the whole human race, not just our little backyard. And also, not in some ineffable hereafter. The prophet sees the big picture -- war, starvation, poverty, disease, nuclear weapons, global warming, greed, selfishness. The prophet looks at these current realities and interprets them through God's eyes, not through the eyes of analysts or pundits or Pentagon press spokespeople. The prophet tells us God's take on what's happening.

Fourth, a prophet takes sides. A prophet stands in solidarity with the poorest, with the powerless and the marginalized -- with the crucified peoples of the world, as Ignacio Ellacuria once put it. A prophet becomes a voice for the voiceless. Indeed, a prophet is the voice of a voiceless God.

Fifth, all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible are concerned with one main question: justice. They call people to act justly and create a new world of social and economic justice. For justice lies at the heart of God; God requires justice on earth. And the prophet won't shy from telling us -- if we want a spiritual life, we must work for justice.

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Sixth, prophets simultaneously announce and denounce. They announce God's reign of justice and peace. And at the same time, they publicly denounce the world's regimes of injustice and war. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, they hold high the alternatives of nonviolence and disarmament, and lay low the obsolete ways of violence and weapons.

Seventh, a prophet confronts the status quo. With the prophet, there is no sitting back. The powerful are challenged, empires resisted, systemic injustice exposed. Prophets vigorously rock the leaky ship of state and shake our somnolent complacency. Matters are urgent, they say. Drop what you're doing. Justice is a matter of life or death. Brush aside all tin patriotism; put nationalism behind you. Like the Roman standards the Judeans recoiled at, nationalism is today's idolatrous banner. A banner that incites toward mass murder. The prophet would challenge such idolatry head on.

Eighth, for the prophet, the secure life is usually denied. More often than not the prophet is in trouble. Prophets call for love of your nation's enemies. They topple the nation's idols, upset the rich and powerful, and break the laws that would legalize mass murder. The warlike culture takes offense, and it dismisses the prophet, not merely as an agitator, but as obsessed and unbalanced. Consequently, the prophet ends up outcast, rejected, harassed, and marginalized. And eventually, punished, threatened, targeted, bugged, followed, jailed, and sometimes killed.

Ninth, prophets bring the incandescent word to the very heart of grudging religious institutions. There the prophet confronts the blindness and complacency of the religious leader, the bishops and priests who keep silent amid national crimes; the ministers who trace a cross over industries of death and rake blood money into churchly coffers. A bitter irony and an ancient story -- and all but inevitable. The institution that goes by the name of God often turns away the prophet of God.

Tenth, true prophets take no delight in calling down heavenly bolts. Rather they bear an aura of compassion and gentleness. They are good and decent, kind and generous. They exude joy. True, the common image of John the Baptist portrays white-hot anger and indignant rage. But such a characterization is one-dimensional. In his own words, he's the best man who listens attentively to the voice of the bridegroom, and so, he concludes, "My joy is complete" (John 3). He was, I submit, a person of joy.

Eleventh, prophets are visionaries. In a culture of blindness, they offer insight. In a time of darkness, they light our path. When no one else can see, the prophet can. And what they see is a world imbued with God's purposes. A world of justice and peace and security for all. A world where all of creation is safe and at rest. The prophet holds aloft the vision -- it's ours for the asking. The prophet makes it seem possible, saying, let's make it come true and we shall be blessed.

Finally, the prophet offers hope. Now and then they might sound despairing, but only because they have a heightened awareness of the world's darkest realities: wars, violence, greed, nuclear weapons and global warming. Such reality overwhelms us; we would rather not hear. But hearing is our only hope. For behind the prophet's unvarnished vision lies a hope we seldom understand -- the knowledge that God is with us. To realize the hope we must trust ourselves to plumb the depths and trust God to see us through.

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A dozen characterizations of the prophet, and still most of us probably find this edgy calling confusing if not terrifying. My friend, the late Pax Christi leader, Jim McGinnis spent some time in recent years pondering this and wrote about the difference between true and false prophets.

True prophets do not call attention to their own person as much as to their message, whereas false prophets often seek personal glory and praise and perhaps material reward. True prophets, although often at the center of controversy, are most often people of peace, compassion, nonviolence and justice; while false prophets often create dissension for its own sake or to serve the goals of a very small, vested interest group. True prophets are willing to sacrifice their lives if necessary in order to be true to the message they proclaim; false prophets seldom go the extra mile if confronted by the threat of harm. True prophets are devoted to others; false prophets are ultimately selfish or in serious error about the true nature of people. True prophets are outside the establishment and empire and powerbrokers; false prophets, in the biblical tradition, were inside the court, advising the rulers, and making a career of it.

During the retreat, I raised a few questions which I pass on here. What to you is a prophet? Who are the prophets you listen to? What prophets have you known personally? Who has shed unexpected prophetic light on your path? Where is the prophetic vision shaping up around you? How have you joined in, and how can you join in even more? How might you add your voice anew to public denunciations against imperial injustice and war? Poverty and greed? Nuclear arsenals and military adventures? How can you help others to reinvigorate the ways of the prophet? How can we be 'students of the prophetic way'?

'It's not so much that we are political,' Daniel Berrigan once advised me. 'We just speak out publicly.'

In a time of deafness, blindness and muteness, we are called to listen even more attentively to the God of peace, and to speak even more publicly God's word of peace, to break through the silence, complicity and acceptance of our world's violence and be a prophetic people, with all the pain, persecution and blessings that come our way.

The weekend in Adelaide was a great chance to pray, reflect and ponder these challenges. Participants agreed to spend one year praying through this material and taking steps 'along the prophetic way.' I hope and pray that the God of peace will raise a new generation of holy prophets who speak the truth and call us back to God's way of justice and peace.

This week, John's new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, appears from Orbis Books. His other recent books, *A Persistent Peace and Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For information, or to schedule a speaking event, visit: www.johndear.org.

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