

'The Formation of Prophetic Saints'

A sermon preached by Professor John Hull on All Saints' Day, 1 November 2009, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

Today is All Saints' Day. All Christians are called to be saints and I want to share with you this morning the calling and formation of a particular kind of saint, those that stand in the tradition of the biblical prophets. I am thinking of the prophetic tradition associated with Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, to name just a few, and of the word and actions of the prophet Jesus who was more than a prophet. The tradition of prophecy was continued in the early Christian churches; when Paul is listing the gifts given to the church he refers to apostles, prophets and teachers. This tradition is still alive today. Martin Luther King Jr, for example, is usually regarded as one of the greatest prophets of the 20th century, not that he foretold the future, but because he defended the powerless and protested against injustice.

The characteristic feature of the prophet is that he or she sees more deeply into events, has a sharper appreciation of the impact of power upon those who are powerless, of wealth upon those who are poor and of injustice upon its victims. In other words, 'prophetic' is the word we use in the Christian tradition to speak of social justice. The prophetic saint is one who is called by God to witness against the unjust power structures of society, and who speaks for the mission of God, the God whose arms are stretched out in judgement and mercy to this troubled world.

In The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, where I work, we expect men and women training for Christian ministry to become leaders and inspirers of social justice in churches they will one day serve. Every student who trains here for ministry in the Church of England, the Methodist Church, and several other denominations, is required to develop interests and actions in this area. We also provide some activities which they may join to give them experience of public ministry in social justice. For example, some students took part in the fast sponsored by the Jubilee Debt campaign to express solidarity with some of the world's poorest countries; we have gone into the Birmingham city shopping centre in the lead up to Christmas to protest against excessive consumption by people trapped in the shopping mania and we have sung alternative Christmas carols; some students have marked the anniversary of the Iraq war by walking through the city streets as a 'procession of lamentation' calling out the names of British and Iraqi people killed in the war.

One of our leading activities has been to protest against nuclear weapons. We have been to the naval base in Scotland where Britain's fleet of nuclear weapon submarines is based and have thus expressed our solidarity with the policies of most if not all the main denominations in Britain. We have been inspired in this respect by the work of the Trident Ploughshares organisation. The original American Ploughshares movement began in resistance to the Vietnam war, but has continued as a movement of protest against the nuclear weapons of the United States government. It mainly consists of Catholic priests and nuns. They have witnessed for Christ against these horrific and illegal weapons of mass destruction, taking considerable risks, and many have suffered arrest and imprisonment. The British branch, the Trident Ploughshares movement, is more secular in outlook, although many radical Christians are involved in it. It takes the view that since the United Kingdom is committed by international law to work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, the proposal to renew them is contrary to international law. It is therefore the duty of citizens to

seek by persuasion and by direct action to prevent our government from engaging in these illegal activities. On Monday 15th February in 2010 there will be a large blockade of Aldermaston, the place where the warheads for the nuclear missiles are made. Faith groups have been asked to meet at one of the seven gates of the Atomic Weapons Establishment and The Queen's Foundation has adopted this as part of its prophetic training.

But how are such radical Christians formed? Why is it that in most local congregations you will find only about 15-20% of the people interested in any kind of action for peace and justice? What happened or failed to happen to the majority?

This is a fundamental question facing Christian adult education today. How can our churches move out of the privatised, individualised inward faith which we seem to have inherited from recent centuries of Christian faith? How is it that so many Christians are concerned for their own salvation but not so much for the living and dying of people in the world God loves?

Each of us here this morning will have our own stories of how we have come into Christian faith, and of how it has shaped us. As far as I am concerned, and now I intend to speak in a very personal way, it was the loss of my sight in adult life which stimulated in me a sense of solidarity with the excluded and marginalised people of the world. That story is too complex to share with you today but I will mention just one aspect. When you encounter a major loss, whether it be the death of someone you loved, a serious illness or accident, or a huge disappointment of your hopes, how do you react? How do you cope with loss? How do you prevent yourself from sinking into bitterness?

This is a complex question but the answer is a simple one. You have to turn your internal bitterness out toward the world and let it take the form of anger. When I lost my sight I was too busy trying to keep my job to sink into bitterness although there were moments when I came close. One of the things that saved me was that now and again a blind student would come to my office door with a story of such discrimination that I would be absolutely aflame with indignation. I would grab the phone as soon as the student had left the room to speak to the people responsible for the situation. I learnt to follow and to admire our Lord Jesus Christ who when they criticized him for healing a lame man on a sacred day looked around at them in anger. This is the prophet Jesus I have come to know and to love. As a blind person I often experienced the humiliation of losing my adult status, of becoming incompetent, of being patronised by too much sympathy and out of these little daily frustrations I gradually came to have a sense of unity with those who suffer far greater humiliations and losses than these.

This is the root of the matter, my friends. If in the comfort and success of your life you have never suffered a profound loss you will have to find some other way to become a prophetic saint, because there are many ways and none of us has done more than take the first steps on that challenging road. But if you have suffered a painful loss, then this is your All Saints' Day. I challenge you this morning to turn the bitterness you may be tempted to feel for yourself into anger and into action for others!

And what about you, my brother and sister here this morning? What is your way to start on the path toward prophetic sainthood? And what about you, my son, my daughter? - for many of you here this morning are young enough to be my sons and daughters if not my grandchildren. I challenge you this morning in the name of Amos who said that justice

should roll down like a mighty stream, and in the name of Jesus Christ who came to seek and save the lost, to examine your lives and to respond to the call of the God of peace and justice.

To that one God, Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, be all glory, honour and power.
Amen.

John Hull is Honorary Professor of Practical Theology in The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, and Emeritus Professor of Religious Education in The University of Birmingham.