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# An Orientation to Prophecy

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Morning Plenary  
Worship at the 22nd  
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*and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13)*

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## INTRODUCTION

This plenary address was given at the Friends World Committee for Consultation Triennial Gathering in August 2007, at Kings Hospital School, Dublin, Ireland. Marion McNaughton spoke to the gathering on the second day of the Triennial. We have tried to follow the capitalization and spelling conventions of the original text.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marion McNaughton comes from an Irish/Scottish background and has lived most of her life in England. She has been at various times a teacher, lecturer and counselor, and active in peace, justice and women's issues in Britain and the USA. She is a mother and a grandmother. She is a passionate gardener. Her home is in Birmingham, UK, where she is currently involved in several interfaith activities. She had been Coordinator of the Northern Friends Peace Board in Britain, and Lecturer in Practical Theology at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham UK. She is a trustee and Chair of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, a Quaker trust which seeks to address the causes of social injustice, inequality and oppression, and search out the roots of conflict.

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Effective prophets work from a place of love. They nurture us, they inspire us to engage with our faith in deeper and deeper ways. We are inspired, we lead committed lives which return us always to our spiritual core. It is circular. Our outward lives are shaped from within, our actions bring us closer to God, and we live God's truth in the world.

Because whatever form it takes, prophecy is essentially mystical. God breaks through. The world is imperfect, but it is still wholly of God, wholly divine. The prophets are those who enable us to see that God is always available to us, the kingdom is always about us. Rosa Parks, one of my inspirations, one of the enablers of the American Civil Rights Movement, sat down in the middle of a bus and simply enacted the kingdom of heaven, a world of justice and equality. And God's voice was heard. One of the people sitting at the back, unable to move, said later, "It was holy in that bus."

When we can prophesy with this kind of love, this kind of clarity, this kind of holiness, God's voice will be heard.

## AN ORIENTATION TO PROPHECY

If we want to bring the Kingdom of Heaven we must have insight, skills, compassion, abounding love, and methods that work. We must be people who fill other people with hope, not despair. It is no good being right for 23 years if no one is listening to us.

Effective prophecy energises and encourages people. It acknowledges their failures and inadequacies, but it doesn't blame—it comforts and consoles. It believes in people. It is an invitation to return to God. And because it is deeply rooted in God, it can bring others to God's presence. Open Isaiah at chapter 40 and hear the unknown prophet we call Second Isaiah pour out love and consolation:

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. (Isa.40:1-2a)*

This is a prophetic voice we can respond to. It lifts our hearts, it renews our strength, we can “mount up with wings like eagles.”

So what do we need in prophecy that will enable people to hear the voice of God? It is very simple. Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine, has said:

*We must love the age we live in. From the point of view of faith, the best age for each of us is the one God has placed us in, the one he has given us, and which we must give back to him.*

We must love the age we live in.

Sometimes this is very hard to do, but it is our task.

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries*

I believe that we are part of a very long tradition of being a people of God. It has its roots in the Jewish tradition. Jesus, who was a Jew, carried many of the elements of his tradition into the new Christian world. And we as Quakers carry all this forward in a special way today. To understand prophecy we must understand where we come from.

Many people have helped me understand this over the last year, and I would like to thank them. Rabbi Margaret Jacobi of the Birmingham Progressive Synagogue for her knowledge of the Hebrew prophets; Rabbi James Baaden of the South London Liberal Synagogue for his understanding of the ending of Jewish prophecy; Timothy Peat Ashworth of Woodbrooke for his insights into the early Christian communities; and my colleagues on Britain Yearly Meeting's Testimonies Committee, who, more than anyone else, have taught me what it is to live faithful prophetic lives.

## PROPHECY

Let us begin with the elements that are there in what we name as prophecy:

- In both Jewish and Christian theology prophecy is understood as a spontaneous human response to a transforming encounter with God, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- It can take the form of words, signs, actions, or a way of life.
- It can be exercised by men, women, children, individuals or groups. It is a gift from God. It speaks God's truth.
- It is rooted in known values, the religious values of its community.
- It pinpoints the behaviours, attitudes and events that reveal

where a people, or a ruler, are being faithful, and where they have gone astray. It affirms and it criticises.

- It warns of the consequences of continuing on the wrong path. It foretells disasters. Thus the prophet both belongs and challenges.
- It calls repeatedly for what is known in the Hebrew tradition as *teshuvah*, turning: turning away from the world and returning to God.
- It is awesome and unmistakable. We hear the voice of God. We should not use the word *prophecy* lightly or seek to be comfortable with it. Prophecy is always challenging and usually uncomfortable.

Our task this week is to find the prophetic voice for our time. So I am going to look briefly at the prophetic tradition we stand in, and what riches and contradictions it brings with it.

I shall begin with the Hebrew tradition, because this was the tradition that Jesus inherited. Then I shall look at how prophecy died away in the Jewish tradition but came alive in the ministry of Jesus, and then again in the early Christian communities. Then see how we as Quakers practise and affirm prophecy, and what our prophetic calling might be as a people of God.

But I will also be asking—because this is important to me in my own life—why prophecy has so often failed, or proved to be ineffective. We know that prophets encounter resistance and apathy. The prophet Ezekiel was told by God:

*I send you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious breed) they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. (Eze.2: 4-5)*

People **do** know when there has been a prophet among them, but that does not mean they do what the prophet tells

What will enable people to hear the voice of God? What will bring the changes we long to see?

Let us go back to Jeremiah for a moment, prophesying for 23 years without anyone listening to him. His name has been immortalised for this. The dictionary says:

*Jeremiah: someone who is pessimistic about the present and foresees a calamitous future; a person given to woeful lamentation and complaining.*

Well, I don't know about you, but I find it incredibly hard to listen to someone filled with woeful lamentation and complaining, for 23 minutes, let alone 23 years. The Hebrew prophets were always ready to blame the people for refusing to hear the word of God. But I have to wonder, could it have been something to do with the way the word of God was being preached? Did the prophets fall into the trap of expressing their own frustration and anger? Did their own despairing voices sometimes speak louder than God's?

I was recently at a conference when a Friend who was deeply concerned about a matter of great spiritual importance, stood up and lectured us for a long time about how urgent this was, how we must all stop what we were doing and turn our energies to this one problem. We listened with sinking hearts. When he finished and sat down, the person next to me leaned across and whispered, 'This nagging has to stop!' This was not the response he had been hoping for.

How can we help each other from falling into this trap? Let us think for a moment of those self-appointed prophets we all turn away from. They are well-intentioned. But they drown us in their urgency and their fear. They make us feel guilty and inadequate. They blame us. They depress and immobilise us. They are doing their best but they are having no effect. This nagging has to stop.

noted that whenever he consulted scripture, he found them confirmed. After the fall of James Nayler, Friends came to understand that prophecy must be tested, and we do this today. Some of us confirm leadings by reference to scripture, others by reference to the collective discernment of the gathered meeting. But the leading from God always remains primary.

- Quaker prophecy today, as in the Hebrew tradition, has the same dual purpose, the same triangular relationship with God. To enlighten, nurture and extend the spiritual community. And also to speak truth to those in power, to take prophetic action, to press for change in the world.
- We can do both! We must do both! Both are holy. Abraham Heschel, a Jew, marched from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King in 1965. It was a bloody, confrontational event, but it was for him a deeply spiritual occasion. When he returned, he told his daughter, “I felt as if my legs were praying.”

There is a whole spectrum of prophetic possibility open to us, calling for our attention. Do we practise it all? Or do we settle for just a part, just one place on the spectrum? What does the Lord require of us? I see our diversity as an uncomfortable challenge that we hold out to each other, for all of us to be more than we are being at present. Some of us concentrate on silent waiting, some on proclamation, some on mission, some on social action. All of these things are part of the prophetic tradition, and none of us fulfils them all. So we serve as uncomfortable reminders and loving prompts to each other—Friend, is there something you are neglecting?

#### WHAT KIND OF VOICE?

So what kind of Quaker prophetic voice is needed today?

them. The prophet Jeremiah, one of the great Hebrew prophets, complained:

*For 23 years. . . the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. (Jer.25:3)*

I shall be asking “Why? Why did they not listen? Why do they not listen today?” We need to know the answers to this.

#### PROPHECY IN THE HEBREW TRADITION

In using the word “prophecy” we are acknowledging that we are part of a continuing sacred tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, prophecy comes through the great figures of the prophets. The prophet in Hebrew is referred to as *ish ha-ruach*, which means “a person filled with the spirit of God.”

The prophets are giants in the landscape of the Hebrew scriptures, a series of extraordinary, inspired men and women. Let us remember that there were women as well as men, though mostly the women’s words have not been preserved, and apart from one or two, like Huldah and Miriam, we do not know their names.

In the Hebrew tradition the prophet is someone chosen by God. Their task is to stand in the presence of God, hear God’s pain and love for the world, and transmit it to God’s people. The prophet does not decide to be a prophet; he or she is called, and responds to God’s call, often hesitantly or unwillingly.

The prophet is filled with God’s spirit—*ish ha-ruach*—then speaks of it in God’s voice. God told Ezekiel:

*I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless. . . But when I speak with you I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God. (Eze.3:26-27)*

And Jeremiah cried out:

*There is in my heart as it were a burning fire . . . and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.* (Jer. 20:9)

So the prophet utters God's words because he can do no other. But who must he speak them to? This is the crucial element, the absolute essence of Hebrew prophecy. He must prophesy both to his own community, and to those in power. This triangular relationship is at the heart of what the Hebrew prophet is about—strengthening his community, and speaking truth to the power of the kings. A courageous, daunting role to play.

He names where the people, and their ruler, are being faithful, and where they have gone astray. He affirms them but he criticises. He calls repeatedly for teshuvah, re-turning to God. He warns of the consequences of continuing on the wrong path. He both belongs and challenges.

The prophet is of the people, speaking the words of God from among the people, both to the people and to the king. He recalls the people and the rulers to what is at the heart of their beliefs. This is who we are. And what does the Lord require of us?

This role of standing both within and apart from the tradition, of belonging and constantly challenging, makes the prophet a strange and isolated person. Abraham Heschel, who was a great Jewish philosopher, mystic and activist of the 20th century, describes it in this way:

*The prophet is a lonely figure. His standards are too high, his stature too great, and his concern too intense for other men to share. Living on the highest peak, he has no company except God.* (The Prophets: Heschel)

Now this is worrying, if what we are looking for is a model of prophecy that is both inspired and effective, that reaches those it intends to change. Because what we find in the Hebrew

Hebrew scriptures? Are we right to use the same word? It has many of the traditional characteristics. It is inspired by the Spirit, it empowers and builds the community, it challenges, it recalls us to God. But it is no longer dependent on a lone voice to lead and expound. It is instead, collective, egalitarian. This understanding of prophecy is what Christians developed, what the Jewish tradition stands apart from, and what early Quakers then re-discovered 350 years ago as they felt the Spirit moving among them.

#### QUAKERS AS A PROPHETIC COMMUNITY

As Quakers today we have inherited a long prophetic tradition of richness and complexity and it is ours to use. So how are we choosing to respond to it? Today in the Quaker family we interpret prophecy in different ways, yet I believe there is an underlying unity in our practice, and if we understand our tradition as a whole, we can make this diversity a gift, not a stumbling block. Here are some of the key elements:

- Quaker prophecy is the experience of the word of God, alive among us, directly felt and recognised. It can come out of silence, speech, scripture or song, however we worship, however we minister.
- There is always a message of some kind; enlightening, clarifying, demanding.
- The message is intended for us and for others. Who they are can be familiar, those in our meetings, or still unknown, those we reach out to. These are the tasks of teaching and of mission.
- There can be both individual Quaker prophets and also prophetic Quaker communities. Both have their strengths and their limitations. Both can exist together.
- George Fox never felt he needed to verify his leadings, but

It begins with a blessing and ends with a call to action. And so the way was open for something to come into being, which moved on from the old tradition and challenged the idea that the Holy Spirit was no longer active and alive.

Beginning with the extraordinary events of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus began to experience the Holy Spirit for themselves, in a transforming and empowering way, not as a few lone individuals, but as a gathered group. The Spirit flowed among them. It is difficult to overestimate the wonder and significance of this. They understood this Spirit to come from God, it empowered them to teach and expound their beliefs. Prophecy was alive among them again, but the single prophet had become the prophetic community.

So these early Christians moved on from their Jewish roots and took prophecy with them, understanding and experiencing it as a gift of the Holy Spirit to be practised together in an entirely new, egalitarian way.

Paul told the Corinthians:

*Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy...those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation...those who prophesy build up the church...I would like all of you...to prophesy. (1 Cor. 14:1-5)*

This is an extraordinary development. Paul's phrase "I would like all of you to prophesy" takes us into a new way of being a community of prophecy. Instead of the fearful community of Moses, standing a long way off, unable and unwilling to hear the word of God directly, dependent on their prophet to mediate God to them, we have an empowered prophetic community, sharing the gift, able to hear and respond to the Holy Spirit directly.

But is this the same kind of prophecy that we find in the

model, with a few exceptions, is almost a built-in distancing—as Heschel says, God on the highest peak with the prophet, and the people and the king a long way off.

In Deuteronomy we read that after God had spoken "out of the fire" and given Moses the Ten Commandments, the elders and heads of the tribes, shaken by what they had overheard of the encounter, said to Moses:

*If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? You go closer (this is to Moses), you go closer, and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it. (Deut. 5: 25-27)*

You can almost hear them shrinking back. The people felt that having heard God speak once, they had gone to the limits of what they could endure. To hear God's voice directly, exposed them to the heart of the divine fire, and they wanted to withdraw to a safe distance, to have God's word in future mediated to them through someone else.

This is familiar to us today. But there is a built-in challenge here for the prophet. The purpose is to connect, to transmit. If the people are reluctant to come close to God's presence, how can the prophet reproduce God's fire for them?

And if people miss the fire, do they also miss the force of the message?

This is the paradox of biblical prophecy. It is a challenge from God to do God's work in the world. It takes over the prophet's whole life. And it may fail. We inherit a legacy of inspiration, courage and spiritual power. But also a role model with built-in limitations. Sometimes the prophets influenced those in power, as Nathan the prophet did with King David. At

other times they were ignored. “Living on the highest peak with no company except God,” they sometimes failed to transmit their message. We, too, in our own times can be faithful for long periods without apparently succeeding in conveying God’s word. We know the heartbreak of this. And we can be successful, and we know that joy. We need to reflect this week on why these things happen, what we can learn from them, and what, if anything, we can help each other do about it.

#### THE ENDING OF JEWISH PROPHECY

But, after generations of Hebrew prophecy, we have a mystery. The line of prophets suddenly came to an end, in the late 6th century BCE, after the Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon had rebuilt the temple. No new prophets emerged. No one understood why. The power of the Holy Spirit, that enabled the prophets to speak the word of God, seemed not to be active among them any more. And the rabbis eventually told the people, “Since the death of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.”

The Holy Spirit departed from Israel.

The effect of this on the continuing Jewish tradition was profound. Prophecy belonged to the past. What needed to be revealed had been revealed. New self-proclaimed prophets were regarded with suspicion.

This is something that Jews still believe today, though they have no single explanation for why it should be so. They will tell you, as my Jewish friends and teachers tell me, “Prophecy ended when the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.” So today the Jewish community turns to the Bible and their holy texts for inspiration, to be studied and prayed with and explored. But they do not expect contemporary human prophecy.

I feel some sadness at this, some bewilderment, and I asked

one of the rabbis: “But why? Why, after all those years, did God suddenly stop trying to communicate with God’s people? Why did the Holy Spirit abandon them?” And the rabbi smiled at this impertinent Quaker and said, “That’s a very good question, Marion, but we don’t know the answer.”

We don’t know the answer either. I would reject the Christian supercessionist belief that God switched God’s favour from one chosen people to another. I find it a desolate and a courageous place for a people of God to stand in, listening only for God’s true voice. For me it raises the ongoing question of the truth of scriptural revelation and the truth of contemporary revelation. As Quakers we want to have both. And we need to ask, Where do we feel the Holy Spirit at work?

#### JESUS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

So into this absence of Jewish prophecy came Jesus. Would we name Jesus a prophet? Most commentators nowadays say yes, this was how Jesus understood himself, and how he was seen by his Jewish followers during his lifetime—as a prophet in the Hebrew tradition, mediating God’s word to God’s people and to the authorities.

Christians of course would say Jesus was much more, that he was divine, that he was the redeemer. But at the time, the role he played, in teaching his followers, and challenging the religious authorities, was in line with the Jewish prophetic tradition. The people felt his authority. As we have seen, true prophecy has an unmistakable effect on its hearers—they know when there has been a prophet among them. The people heard the voice of God through Jesus and acknowledged him as a prophet.

His role may have been familiar but his teaching was new. The Sermon on the Mount offers us a radical and empowering way to be faithful in the world, to realise the kingdom of heaven.