

One of the symptoms of schizophrenia I have read, a devastating form of mental illness that breaks and confuses the human spirit, is hearing voices - loud, demanding, seducing voices that pull apart the sanity of a centred soul. I believe in many ways that we live in a schizophrenic culture. We are bombarded with voices demanding, analysing, projecting, pleading, persuading, and seeking to control our hearts and our minds. We are a noisy, verbose culture, cluttering the airwaves and the printed page with images and accusations. It has crept into our church under the guise of corporate world thought processes, the right to know, a diminishing of the authority of scripture and self-inflation and entitlement at the expense of Our Lord. As one vociferous opinion follows another, I am always amazed that people have the time to listen to self appointed experts spending great amounts of time pontificating.

The question for us today, as Christians who follow Jesus, is which and where is the voice of God? In the midst of all this noise, how do we recognise the particular tones and colour of Our Lord, calling us to the safety of spiritual wholeness? How do we sift through the voices in our heads and our hearts, listening to the one voice that matters, so that we can become centred in wholeness, and we can defend ourselves from the splintering tongues of cultural and personal demons?

In our noisy world, where Bethlehem has become bedlam and electronic devices prevent us from wandering far from Facebook, emails, the internet, music, news, or serialised entertainment, it is hard to hear a clear prophetic voice. When it happens, now and again, heads turn and conversation is stilled.

As we read in today's Gospel, people may push the prophet away. "It's only rhetoric!" "Fancy words, that's all!" "Nice talk, but we have to live in the real world!" In fact, responding well to a prophet's message is not usually a natural human trait. Not even when the prophet is Jesus or the message as hopeful as the brief one he delivered that day in his hometown synagogue which we read in our Gospel.

Yet those who receive the words of the prophet with uncensored ears and wistful hearts are rewarded. For a few brief moments in time the voice of God resonates. Cataracts melt from eyes and fear dissolves in the mind. Sight is restored, vision refocused, lives are mended, and hope leads the way. This is why Moses promised ancient Israel that God would always provide prophecy for them, leading eventually to the voice of the great one, who would proclaim loudly the goodness of heaven. This is why the apostle Paul's voice was still requested by the Corinthian congregation after he left, even when restless arguing and division sometimes muted his authority among them. This is why even the demons shouted when Jesus passed by, hoping to embarrass him into silence. Even our schizophrenic world with all of its allures will in the end never win. For the true prophet's voice cannot be stilled. That is why and what we preach today. That is what, the very foundations of this Church are built upon.

Every society wants its scapegoats, just as every people is looking for a prophet. The two are very closely related, as Plato reflected in *The Republic*. Moses himself was a prophet who more than once became the target of a frustrated Israel and a good number of coup attempts, even from his own family. When Moses gave his farewell address, he assured the Israelites, in Deuteronomy 18, that God would provide future prophetic leadership to fill the void left by Moses' own imminent departure. Israel needed a prophet, if it was to fulfil its divine mission and purpose. So it is no wonder that when young Jesus comes home to preach and delivers a prophet's message, scapegoating and admiration dance a tango in the local crowd.

Of course, opening this door of prophetic expectation served as a blanket invitation to charlatans and self-aggrandising tyrants who would vie, throughout Israel's history, as contenders for the office left too long

vacant. Some would be kings who cared not for the covenant mediated by Moses; others would flash their mail-order degrees from feel good schools of spirituality and claim these as prophetic license. “Watch out!” Moses commanded. The true prophet who comes in my place and speaks for God will be known because he will tell the truth.

It is no wonder that centuries later the remnant of Israel, now reduced to the bickering residue of Judah, were still looking for the great prophet. When Jesus came, speaking with honesty, speaking with clarity, speaking with no pretence, the crowds began asking anew, “Is this the prophet?”

We can imagine what people were talking about in Nazareth. Jesus bursts upon the scene in Galilee like a whirlwind. Jesus walked restlessly around the Jezreel Valley with fierce intensity, preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. Almost immediately Jesus is the new religious sensation, the talking point for all social commentators.

Jesus is also the familiar stranger for the ordinary people in the north country. He is the man who lives down the road, yet remains an enigma to his own family. Those around him recognise Jesus as the boy who grew up in the next town, even while people of the area are disturbed by the striking power and authority that lingers in the air around Jesus wherever he goes. It quickly becomes obvious that Jesus’ own disciples don’t really know him, and we are not that different from them. It takes a demonic spirit to call out what the crowds are not willing to admit: “I know who you are — the holy one of God!”

St Luke wants us to face the challenge early in our encounter with Jesus through his gospel. We may dislike the man. We may revile him. We may try to suck up to him or wheedle him like some magical genie **but ignore him we may not do**. Otherwise even the demons will cry out in awe-filled recognition.

Why did Jesus seem to have authority that was lacking among the usual teachers of the law in his day? Part of what people sensed was likely the divine Spirit through Jesus’ personality, his sheer presence, commanding attention simply because it is impossible to ignore God when pitched that close at hand. But probably Jesus’ authority had to do also with the nature of his teaching. The scribes and teachers of the law were careful not to equate their words or interpretations, as either equal to or taking precedence over the written word of God. So, at most, they could rise to the social level of “rabbi,” “my teacher.” They remained interpreters of the divine text, not prophets revealing a new message from God. Jesus, however, was not limited in this manner. He could interpret the given text with appropriate confidence and also declare new words of heavenly testimony. Because cult leaders attempt to do this all the time, there was a sense about whether the early following that surrounded Jesus was exactly that: cultish. But Jesus has something going for him, a message so filled with grace and mercy, actions so humble and sincere that no Jim Jones, Charles Manson, or David Koresh would or could ever possess; which could only come from the Son of God.

While those in Nazareth may not have known what to do with Jesus, Jesus certainly knows what to do with us. As we mob him, seeking a way to quiet his prophetic voice, Jesus slips through our mayhem, ready to fulfil what will become his most powerful prophetic message.

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