

Testament, is here to stay. God has taken up a permanent dwelling with His people, the Church. One great hope of the Old Dispensation has been fulfilled. But the figure of the Son of Man in the midst of the vision of heaven tells us that still another ancient expectation is being realised—the ascent of humanity to God. The closing chapters of the Apocalypse show that state finally attained: the Church is clothed at last in the glory that was hers from the beginning. The Bride is sharing in the privileges of the Bridegroom, Paradise has been regained.

If we were to try and seek what role John would have us play during this interval before the last act of the drama of redemption, we shall find it is that of witness: witness to the work of Christ as a past event, a present experience and a future hope. This may entail some suffering—it is not without interest that we find the Greek word *martyria* ('bearing witness') hardening, in the Apocalypse, into our 'martyrdom.' Yet that great Victory Hymn of the persecuted Church still echoes its epic of Christian hope, and its rewarding and consolatory promise is held out to us.

PATRICK FANNON, S.M.M.

*St Mary's Scholasticate
Church Stretton*

THE PROPHETS AND POLITICS

A surprising feature of the prophets of Israel is their involvement with the political life of their day. That they should be concerned with religion and with fundamental principles of right and wrong is what we expect; we are even prepared to find that this duty entails their condemnation of public sin and social abuses: but we may not be quite so prepared for their role as self-appointed government advisers, almost equivalent to present-day political columnists in newspapers. The whole work of Ezekiel can only be seen against the background of the Exile and the hope for independence; the teaching of Isaiah is interwoven with the political manoeuvrings occasioned by the Assyrian threats, as that of Jeremiah by the threat from Babylon.

The result is that we cannot sit down peacefully to study the theology of the prophets as we study the theology of St Thomas, in pure principle, undisturbed by external realities. Our study is always interrupted by the need for a quite detailed knowledge of the political

conditions of the time. But this is true of the whole Bible ; and this is one factor in the explanation of this characteristic of the prophets. It is merely another aspect of the basic principle of the Bible, that God has revealed himself in history. He has not revealed theoretical truths, He has intervened in the life of a nation. Therefore clearly the political affairs of that nation cannot be a matter of unconcern to God ; He—and the prophets who are His spokesmen—must have an interest in the choice between alliance with Egypt or with Babylon, between rearmament or non-alignment. It is through the political events that the will of God works its way.

But if this provides a partial explanation for the prophetic interference in national affairs, it is not equally true of their interest in the outside world. Yet all the major prophets and some of the minor have a section in their works entitled 'Burden of the Nations.' Here, it is true, we must bear in mind the editing which these works have undergone ; the original words of the prophets were sometimes added to (in Jeremiah in particular, much of this section is by some later writer), and certainly the grouping is not necessarily the work of the prophet himself but of a later editor. These two factors give undue prominence to this feature of the prophetic work—originally, no doubt, they would fall much more naturally as occasional utterances in the general course of the prophet's preaching. Nevertheless the fact remains that the prophets did take the trouble to cast warnings at Edom, Moab, Babylon, Egypt and the rest—to peoples who would hardly hear or heed their words. Moreover, this is even said to be part of the prophet's mission. 'I have set you to be a prophet to the nations' was the terms of Jeremiah's vocation ; and to the prophetic 'servant of the Lord' in Deutero-Isaiah : 'It is not enough for you to serve me by raising up the tribes of Jacob ; I will make you a light to the nations' (Is. 49:6).

Most of these prophecies have a sombre, threatening tone. This is especially true of Jeremiah ; and it is through Jeremiah that we may begin to see a further explanation of the phenomenon. Jeremiah found himself burdened with the terrible task of raising a solitary voice of despair in the excitement caused by Babylon's accession to power. The fall of Assyria, for so long the focal point of fear, had started off a flurry of planning and speculation about a new and glorious future ; and Jeremiah brought ignominy on himself by stating publicly that the future would be worse rather than better. After a momentary setback (which brought further hope to the nation and additional mental anguish to Jeremiah), the Babylonians did come, and lay encamped all around Jerusalem. More urgently than ever Jeremiah urged the folly of resistance, and even called on soldiers to desert and

citizens to flee. Inevitably, he was treated as a traitor and was imprisoned to prevent his spreading further alarm ; this could be no true prophet, so unlike Isaiah who just a hundred years before had made himself the rallying-point of resistance in similar danger from the Assyrians.

What made things even more difficult for Jeremiah was that he was neither a pacifist nor a defeatist. It was not his own view which counted, but God's—just as it had been for Isaiah in his day. But the point had now been reached when there was no other way for God to deal with Israel than this final and fatal calamity which Jeremiah foretold. The sickness was such that there was no other remedy, because all other remedies had only increased the disease.

For the sickness lay in Israel's attitude to the covenant, which lay at the heart of Israel's existence. The terms of the covenant were : ' You shall be my people, and I shall be your God.' All the world is God's ; it exists by His courtesy, He owns it, He rules it ; but out of all the world, God had freely raised Israel to a position of special favour. Because of this He had ceaselessly showered favours on them, forgiven their many lapses, protected them in danger. This was the aspect of the covenant to which Isaiah had appealed : because they were God's own people, they could rely on His help. But precisely because of this, Israel had taken the second half of the covenant-formula to have the same value as the first : as if God were their possession, as if they owned Him, controlled Him. The covenant was like a magic spell which binds the gods themselves. God was their God ; He even lived in their city ; other people had charms and amulets ; they had the house of God, and in times of danger they clung to this as others to their amulets. As Jeremiah walked round the beleaguered city he passed little groups of people anxiously reassuring themselves that the Temple would ensure their protection, the Temple was here, the Temple of God. . . . ' Trust not these empty words,' Jeremiah replied : ' The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord ! What ? To commit theft and murder, adultery and perjury, and then come to My house and say, We are safe ! You have made it a den of thieves, this Temple which bears My name ' (Jer. 7:4-11). This was the death knell of covenant-magic. This time the enemy would have his way. Babylon was to be the hammer which would break the shell in which they had enclosed God's grace.

But this leads us deeper into the mystery of Israel's political destiny. Their national disaster was to break the shell in which they had enclosed God's grace ; but once the shell was broken, the grace was liberated. To break the shell does not mean to crush and grind to nothingness God's grace. It means to set it free from artificial constriction. Once

the shell is broken, then the true meaning of God's grace and the full scope of it will appear more clearly. It will be seen that it is grace—a free, unmerited favour, unconstricted by national privileges. It will be seen that when God says, 'You shall be my people, I shall be your God,' these two terms are not equivalent. God is not Israel's God in the sense that He is bound irrevocably to them and to their service; He is the God of all the world, and Israel has been chosen to be the instrument through which His will for the world will work. Israel's religion is greater than Israel; they did not make it—it made them. And the same religion, the same faith, the same grace and mercy which made them God's people was to reach out to all mankind. They had bound and limited God; the crushing defeat of the Babylonian exile was to show them that God was not bound, He was not limited.

But this leads us to a further and final point. The prophet's concern with Israel's policies is primarily a moral concern. Jeremiah prophesies disaster not because he is pessimistic by nature but because he sees that sin can have no other result. It is not merely a question of simple retribution, of sanction—that since they have sinned God will punish, and this is the punishment that God happens to have chosen. It is rather that sin is itself disruptive. His firm and clear message of despair is not political insight, nor on the other hand a choice of chastisement which happens to be timely: it is a result of his clear vision of God, in which he sees what sin really is. 'I looked out over the land—and there was chaos; over the heavens—and their light had gone. I looked at the mountains—they trembled; I looked—there were no more men . . . all towns were deserted, before the face of God's anger' (cf. Jer. 4:23-9). The sins of the nation had drawn down on Israel, with a certain inevitability, its own downfall. It was the same message as that of Babel; it was the pride of this group of men, their immense efforts at social collaboration all in the wrong direction, which brought about that confusion of tongues which was symbolic of social discord.

But the same was true of other nations also. Jeremiah was not unpatriotic; he did not take sides against his own people. These others were threatened with disaster in turn. And here too it was not just a question of nationalism; the prophet is not concerned with any nation against another, but only with any nation against God. God is the God of all the world, and He is a holy God. If any people sins, it will bring destruction on itself.

In one of the visions which prepare Jeremiah for his mission, he sees 'a pot simmering northwards' (Jer. 1:14). Various attempts have been made to identify this northern enemy of Israel—the Scythians, the Babylonians and so on. None of these identifications

is very convincing ; and it seems best to take it that it is not meant to be identified. The northern danger is like the locusts in Joel, like Gog and Magog in Ezechiel—and like God and Magog in the Apocalypse. It is not necessarily any specific nation ; it is simply the Judgment of God on the world.

This judgment is expressed in terms of national and international relationships for two reasons. First, because nations too are subject to God, to His law, to the standards of justice which He demands ; and if they fail they, as communities, will be punished just as individuals are. But secondly it is because it is in the national perspective that the fundamental sin is most dangerous. The fundamental sin is pride—self-reliance ; doing without God ; leaving Him out of account or bringing Him in only as a pawn in the game of politics or as a weapon to be used (a casual example may be seen in the sudden introduction of the deity in propaganda speeches in time of war). Pride in this sense—not mere vanity or wilfulness—is the first sin and the basis of all sin. And there is no pride like national pride. Not, again, merely in the sense of exaggerated patriotism ; but in the sense of exclusion of God. In our private lives we are more liable to admit our need and insufficiency. But the very definition of a state is that it should be an independent, self-sufficing unity, so that the sense of an overriding insufficiency is easily blurred. A state provides for itself, by the massive marshalling of individual energies ; the total far exceeds the sum of the individuals ; the individuals indeed must cede their rights to the whole (in our Christian sociology even, is not the final argument ‘ the good of the whole ’ ?). It is in the state that ‘ the world ’ in John’s sense is most clearly personified—not just worldliness, undue trifling with creatures, but in the sense of total exclusion of any superior power. The devil’s supreme title is ‘ prince of this world,’ because political power is the mask he most easily and most successfully dons : ‘ all the riches of the earth and their glory ’ are his to tempt our Lord with, and kings and empires in the Apocalypse are his lackeys.

The social instinct in man is the raw material of the Mystical Body. But it can lead also to that accumulation of our individual alienation from God which is a permanent danger for human societies. For this danger there is only one remedy : that human pride should be brought low (cf. Is. 2:11–19) ; that they should discover by desperate experience that God alone is Lord. For the health and prosperity of a nation it is not armed forces nor skill of diplomacy and statecraft which counts ; but only that God’s will should be done, so that His kingdom should come (Is. 2:4).

L. JOHNSTON

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