

What is a prophet supposed to look like? What is a prophet supposed to behave like? What is a prophet supposed to say?

Perhaps you have a stereotype in your head? You might picture a rather wild man with a big beard, in rags, spouting apocalyptic predictions. You might picture a person who sees things very black and white, with utter clarity, and who tells you this with utter certainty. You may have another picture, I don't know. The first century Jews clearly had some sort of stereotype as well, and bizarrely, both John the Baptist and Jesus fell through the gaps in their popular imagery.

John the Baptist apparently fitted my first image well — a wild man with apocalyptic predictions. But Jesus observes that John the ascetic was popularly rejected as someone who must have a demon — *surely it was a demon that drove him into the wilderness and sparked his urgent preaching of repentance?*

In that case Jesus, who was not at all ascetic, must be instantly accepted by the masses? — because he met with the people, and though neither a drunkard nor a glutton he was known as someone who ate and drank with people. But no, that didn't suit the crowd either — he ate with *tax collectors* and 'sinners', so he couldn't be someone worth paying attention to!

Of course Jesus is mocking the crowd's 'comfortable evasion of God's urgent claim' — they had no intention of hearing either John's or Jesus's calling to respond to the nearness of God's kingdom.

*Plus ça change...* in a western world in which church attendance continues to deteriorate it is easy for us to agonise over this, and suppose it is all our fault. I think the Archbishop of Canterbury lamented recently that the church had continued to shrink under his watch. And, let's be clear, it is right to lament this — we desire that others hear the good news and be shaped by God's grace as urgently now as 2000 years ago. But in our agonising, it is easy to suppose we should have been more of this, or more of that. 'Shouldn't we have been more contemporary, so that entry into the church sub-culture was less jarring?' We might ask. Yes, we should — but there will always be those who reject the faith because it's not *different* enough. 'Should we then be obstinately different?' Yes, we should! Obstinate different over all sorts of things — because Christ's way is not the world's way, and honouring him will inevitably set us apart, though not in any cliquey, snobbish way I hope. But — if we are determinedly different, we can be accused of being out of kilter with society. The point is that today, just as then, the church will never reach those who just want comfortably to evade God's claim.

This is then the reason why Jesus then prays thanks to his Father that he has hidden these things from the wise, and revealed them to little children. Jesus is absolutely *not* about anti-intellectualism — but that the faith defies 'common sense'. It is not 'street' wise, and those who are streetwise will mock the faith.

What Jesus reminds us is important — you don't need to *know* stuff to be saved. St Peter doesn't hand out an exam paper at the pearly gates, and then let through only those who, say, know how the ten commandments, or how many angels can dance on a pinhead, or can quote John 3:16! Faith can be utterly ignorant, but still respond to God's love with love.

Ah, so we really don't need wisdom or knowledge? That makes things easier! No! But we are not anti-intellectual, because for most of us, knowledge helps.

The great theologians of the church fathers, and the reformation, and the present day wasted their time if learning meant nothing. No, their work really has shaped our understanding of God, and that matters — they have helped us to see more clearly.

But to cycle back to Jesus's point, there are many people with great intelligence and knowledge of the Bible — but who still don't know God. Neither knowledge or common sense are the gateway to faith. That is reserved for those who can recognise God at work, and positively respond to God's kingdom call.

What do we receive when we respond to this kingdom call? We get a *comfortable* burden! We do not get lottery ticket ease. Jesus does not remove our burdens or weariness. Faith is not opting out. I think it is about freeing us up to respond to God according to who we are, not according to how someone else says we ought to. Jesus still says: 'take my yoke upon you' — yes we have to work! — but his yoke is easy, which means it won't rub a sore place and become intolerable. I love that Jesus describes himself as gentle and humble in heart.

In a relatively bitty reading from Matthew we have reassured ourselves that while we as the church should constantly reach out to proclaim the good news, we should also not blame ourselves for those who do not respond. Some people are just going to find fault with John the Baptist for being so severe, and with Jesus for not being severe enough. There's just no winning! And we reassure ourselves that while learning and wisdom are good, the core of the faith needs not this, but simply a heart response to God's heart. All the street smarts in the world won't buy you that.

Because in the end we cannot control church growth but we can invite people to encounter Jesus, who is gentle and humble of heart, and whose burden is light.

SDG.