

## Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

### Sung Eucharist

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. Romans 15.4*

Some of you will have been watching the BBC's excellent adaption of Philip Pullman's books *His Dark Materials*. The story's set in an alternate universe, in which society is heavily controlled by what he calls the Magisterium - an oppressive ecclesiastical body, stamping down on knowledge, joy, sexual consciousness – indeed all that makes us fully human.

And yet, amidst all that oppression, there is stirring in the midst the irresistible force of what is called Dust – a forcefield permeating the universe enabling consciousness – giving each of us thought, imagination and feeling. Despite the Magisterium's attempt to hide our awareness of Dust, a young hero - Lyra – is able to read the movements of Dust and, without spoiling it for you, finds herself becoming central to humanity's liberation from this Church-like body.

Now, Pullman describes him 'a Church of England atheist' but there's something of the Jewish and Christian idea of the prophet in Lyra – a girl able to discern, amidst the noise of the world, the deeper meaning of things.

In ancient near Eastern literature, the records of prophets are extensive. Usually they're cultic officials working in the name of the imperial gods (of Babylon or Assyria) and advising kings on political, military or ethical issues. Records stretching back to the eighteenth century BC reveal these characters to be essentially vehicles of politics and propaganda, propping up the opinions of their masters. For example, we read in one inscription from around 800 BC of King Zakkur of Hamath. On this stone, we hear that King Zakkur is surrounded by hostile kings and Zakkur raises his hands to the 'god of heaven', Baal-shamayim, and he consults prophets who reply: 'Do not fear' – and, as you might guess, they promise the king victory over his enemies. And Judah and Israel had prophets in this vein too. Men and women generally found in the royal court and Temple (2 Sam 24:11; 1 Kings 1.8; 2 Kings 22.14), who like Nathan at the court of David, gave support to the royal dynasty through their utterances (2 Samuel 7). These are prophets acting like special

advisers to our politicians today and, more often than not, were egregious yes-men.

Yet increasingly we see a different strand emerging in the Scriptures: the prophet as an outsider pronouncing God's judgement against the religious and political authorities. Often they behaved extremely oddly, falling about in ecstasies (1 Sam 10.5ff; 1 Kings 18.25ff) or accompanying their oracles with strange symbolic actions: shattering pots and wearing yokes like Jeremiah or undertaking strange DIY to represent idolatry like Ezekiel. Frankly, you'd probably call a doctor if you met one of them in the cathedral today and, even at the time, people were prone to dismiss them. After Elisha clears off in manic haste having anointed Jehu in 2 Kings 9, the king's officers say to Jehu, 'Is everything all right? Why did that madman come to you?' and Jehu answers 'You know the sort and how they babble.' This is the prophet, not as royal lackey, but as person you'd definitely avoid on the street.

Such characters become a lot more routine as the kingdoms of Israel and Judah collapse and the Temple and royal leaders are taken into exile. Think of Amos who, far from being a court prophet, is a fig farmer and a son of a herdsman. Like an eighth-century Momentum activist, he attributes the coming collapse of Israel to the wickedness of its rich upper classes and announces that Yahweh will tear down their summer-houses in judgment (Amos 3.15). Or like Isaiah who foresees a fresh shoot from the 'stump of Jesse', who will come to 'judge the needy, give decisions with justice for the poor, and slay the wicked' (Isaiah 11.4). Like the later oracles of Hosea, Malachi or Daniel, this a strand of prophecy as social, political and religious critique, discerning God's *judgement* upon the nation, and yet... a judgement freighted with hope: a hope that justice *will* come, the poor will be raised up, and voice will be given to the voiceless.

And so it is, some seven hundred years after Isaiah and Amos that we meet John the Baptizer, literally an outsider with his pop-up forgiveness outfit by the river Jordan, far from the Temple sacrifices, announcing the kingdom of God is drawing near and urging repentance. He too, like the prophets before him, condemns the religious leadership, the Magisterium of his own day, and announces that the axe is at the root.

We know with anticipation what happens next but Paul urges us not to rush ahead with the story. Like Lyra searching the movements of Dust, the apostle insists upon the importance of tracing the patterns, down the

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centuries, of the deeper meaning of Creation: where, in the scrolls of the synagogue, Paul and his fellow Christians discerned a God who had refused to give up on his creation and the nation of Israel. The more they read, the more they heard, the more they realised that another outsider, Jesus of Nazareth, born of a peasant girl up north, had mysteriously fulfilled Israel's vocation: to be a light to the nations and to usher in a kingdom that would have no end; which would be for all people; a kingdom, where compassion, mercy and care of the vulnerable would be prized; a Kingdom not of this world in which the weak would find strength, the poor wealth, where justice would reign and where even death itself had been destroyed.

This too is our hope, not least in an age in which we feel let down by the yes-men, the false prophets and the shaky empires of our own age. As we prepare to vote, we could do worse than sit with the prophets as they yearn for the light to break in: like Paul, to steep ourselves in what C.S. Lewis called 'that deeper magic from before the dawn of time': God has not given up on us and a new dawn is breaking.