

Trinity 6 2021

I don't know about you, but when I was watching the England-Denmark match on Wednesday I started to feel very old. This was partly because of the sheer pace of play as the youthful footballers darted about the field, but it was mainly due to the Danish goalkeeper – Schmeichel. 'Ah yes', I thought, 'a familiar name at last – Peter Schmeichel is playing for his country tonight instead of Man U'

But of course it wasn't Peter Schmeichel, it was Kasper Schmeichel – his son. How did that happen?!! It was as if I'd looked away for a minute and a whole generation had passed. It was sobering but at the same time inspiring – good to see the talent and skill passed on from father to son, who had - as it were - joined the family firm and taken up the reigns.

We're used to this in other walks of life, for example medicine, and especially common in the Church of England. Toby comes from a long line of priests, and some of the ordinands I teach have fathers and even grandfathers who have been in ministry. You'll remember Chris Bradish (Bill's grandson) who was on placement here. I taught him but I also trained alongside his Dad, Paul.

It was the same for the prophets of ancient Israel. They belonged to a sort of guild and they tended to pass on the job to their sons. To be a prophet was to be part of the family business.

This is why - in our first reading - Amos' statement, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son' is so significant.

Amos has been railing against the injustice, exploitation of the poor and general corruption in the northern kingdom of Israel, and in the process using some of the most eloquent language we find in the Old Testament. He was from the southern country of Judah but he had the gumption to go north and prophesy against their king, Jeroboam. It would be a bit like Sadiq Khan going to Manchester and telling Andy Burnham how to do his

job. So Amasaiah, Jeroboam's right hand man, tells Amos to pack his bags and ply his trade at home.

"O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there;

And in response Amos insists that this is not a trade, he's not working for the family business – which is in fact arboriculture and animal husbandry. Amos is pursuing a *vocation*, not a profession. It was God, not his dad, who told him to speak truth to power.

When somebody tells us something we don't want to hear we can easily defend ourselves against it by saying 'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?' You're a 'Guardian reader', a 'Daily Mail reader', a 'Catholic', an 'evangelical', a 'Brexit'er', a 'Remoaner', a 'sociologist', a 'business mogul', a 'feminist', a 'climate-activist', and so on. We don't have to listen because we have successfully put the person in a box or turned them into a stereotype. This is what Amasaiah is trying to do to Amos when he calls him a 'seer'.

Amos undercuts this by saying, 'I am not what you think; I'm simply telling it as it is.'

Interestingly, John the Baptist, the subject of our Gospel reading also insisted that he was not a stereotype. When Neil was with us, I vividly remember one Sunday when he sang Orlando Gibbons' anthem 'This is the record of John' in which John is asked 'Art thou Elias' and he said 'I am not', 'Art thou the prophet and he answered 'No!'

John was not Elias – that is Elijah, nor was he the prophet like Moses who had been promised in Deuteronomy. And, as with Amos, he was not engaged in the family business. You'll recall that when he was born his father the priest Zechariah was unable to speak because the Angel Gabriel had struck him dumb. So it was his mother, Elizabeth, also of priestly descent, who named him John. And everyone objected – why? Because it wasn't a family name. And that was the point, John was not

going to join the family business of being a priest; he'd been set aside by God for a different – we might even say a higher – vocation. Like Amos, 8 centuries before him, he was called to speak truth to power and to proclaim the Day of the Lord.

Herod, like Jeroboam, didn't want to hear what John was saying – in this case about his personal relationships, so he also tried to put him into a box, this time literally by putting him in prison. And yet John was getting under his skin, touching a nerve, and Herod could not deny that he was righteous – even holy. How convenient then to have some women to hand to scapegoat so that John could be dispatched without guilt or fear.

Except he wasn't, because we are told at the beginning of our Gospel reading that when Herod heard about Jesus he was convinced that John had – like the terminator – come back. Even in death, John troubled Herod.

I think there are two lessons to be taken from all this. The first is that we are all sometimes required to be awkward and troubling - to speak truth to power. It's something we've been trying to do as a Benefice as we meet with our local MP to discuss the environment and climate change and to press for a living wage for carers. But you don't have to have special qualifications to speak out, or to be especially brave or good with words; you simply need to speak when you see something and recognize that it's not right.

The second lesson is that we need to resist that human tendency to put people into boxes so that we don't have to take them and what they are saying seriously. Remember – 'God moves in a mysterious way'. We need to listen because they might just have a word from God for us.