

Hermann Barth

Sermon on Jeremiah 8,4-7

(Hanover International Worship: November 18, 2007)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Dear brothers and sisters,

some ten days ago this year's session of the Synod of the EKD, the Protestant Church in Germany, ended. One of the prominent topics of its agenda was the mission of the church: What are we there for as a Protestant church? Which reforms are needed to make us fit to serve our purpose? Many journalists had come to Dresden. As to the resolution the Synod adopted one of them commented: "The Synod has not passed a prophetic paper, but a document of self-assurance." I wonder what is wrong with self-assurance. But I put this question aside. Turning to the other half of the journalist's comment, I am asking myself: What is "a prophetic paper"?

One thing is for certain: To be a prophet begins with being called by God. Being called means: being singled out, being called forth out of the crowd. This is the reason why I believe prophets are always individuals. There is no such thing as a prophetic paper passed by a synod or a committee. I know many are longing for a prophetic word by the church. But as the synods are concerned - let it suffice that they pass sensible resolutions and, in doing so, prove true to our faith, confident of God's promises and courageous in answering today's challenges. And as the prophets are concerned - nobody can *plan* to be one. Not only because it needs God's calling. *Every single prophetic utterance* needs a divine impulse. It is not the result of deep thought or the work of a committee. Prophets need an intuition of what will come to pass, and this intuition comes upon them unexpectedly, without their will. It obliges them to step forward and to speak up - just as the Apostle Paul describes his situation: "Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (I Corinthians 9,16).

It is another sort of necessity that, all over the EKD, the preachers in today's services have to deal with a passage taken from the Book of Jeremiah (8,4-7). It confronts them and us with the very question that crossed my mind while pondering over the journalist's comment: What is it that makes an utterance prophetic? What is a prophetic existence like? Listening to the passage just try for a moment to stand in Jeremiah's place. Do you like the idea to be called forth by God and to be sent to your people and to be God's mouth for them?

You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD:

"Where is there anybody who if he falls down does not want to stand up?

Where is there anybody who if he goes astray does not want to find the way again?

Why have this people gone astray in perpetual backsliding?

They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return.

I have listened to them and heard not one word of truth,

not one sinner crying remorsefully: 'Oh, what have I done?'

Every one turns to his own course - like a horse plunging headlong into battle.

The stork in the sky knows the time to migrate,

the turtledove, the swallow and the crane know the season of return,

but my people know not the ordinances of the LORD."

I

"You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD". What an extraordinary authority - and bestowed on a human being! The person addressed is empowered to speak in God's place. His or her human words are to be taken for God's own words. The dignity that is given thereby to our frail human words could not be greater nor could be the responsibility that is being laid upon us.

I am feeling this sort of dignity most when, acting in service, I have to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. The congregation have confessed their trespasses and prayed: "Lord Jesus Christ, accept the confession of our sins. Have mercy upon us." And then my part as the minister is to give them the confidence that it is true: "Your sins are forgiven - in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." It makes a difference to express one's trust in God's mercy or to be addressed in the name of God.

There is a similar difference as to the blessing: Of course, we can - and ought to - pray for God's blessing. For God's blessing is not at our disposal. Nevertheless, the blessing at the end of each service is meant to be more than a prayer. As the gesture of blessing is to indicate - the blessing is being laid on us, it is a divine power handed out to us. The minister's words and gestures stand in for what God himself says and does.

And mind you, it needn't be the minister who gives the blessing. To speak in God's name, even to hear confession, is by no means a privilege of ministers and other ordained persons, at least as far as our Protestant understanding is concerned. For the moment it must be enough to remind you of the wonderful words by the Apostle Paul in which every one of us is dignified to be an ambassador for God's reconciliation: "We are ambassadors for Christ. God makes his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God" (5,20). Germany - as all the other states - has only a very limited number of ambassadors that are entitled to speak in the name of the German government. But in God's kingdom all of us are called to be God's ambassadors, and our baptism is the certificate of our appointment.

To be entitled to speak in God's name, however, is not only an honour, it requires a sense of responsibility. Just think of the blessing and the sermon and how they have been used or misused over the centuries. God does not bless anything. God will hold us responsible for any blessing that we have delivered thoughtlessly, that is: without having studied the Bible and the Christian faith and prayed for illumination by God's spirit. I do not only refer to the controversial blessing of gay and lesbian couples. I have my questions, too, when for instance new industrial plants or airports receive an episcopal blessing.

No other institution in our Protestant churches has the same rank and authority as the sermon. If the Bible is said to be the written Word of God, then the sermon can be seen as the oral Word of God. If the heart of the Bible is called the Gospel, then the sermon can be called *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel. For me as preacher on a day like this, with so many listeners and in a foreign language, it is a great comfort to know that God's spirit will make use of my fragmentary thoughts to spread the Word of God and that you will hear my words as God's own words. But at the same time this is the reason why every preacher has such a great responsibility as to what belongs into a sermon and what not. In plain English: The sermon is not the place for political opinions and considerations. The pulpit is not there to provide the minister with an opportunity to publish leading articles. Every word and every thought must be checked whether they seem suitable to serve God's purpose to use my human

words as carrier for his own word. It is true: God can use any words and thoughts to reach his purpose. But do we really want to bother God's spirit with a lot of unnecessary work?

II

In the prophetic stories and books of the Old Testament the phrase with which the passage from the Book of Jeremiah begins recurs frequently. The Bible scholars have given it the name: the messenger formula. *You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD:* With these words the prophets identify themselves as God's ambassadors. Many of them are nothing else than the mouth of God, their individual personality does not matter, it vanishes behind their function to announce what will come to pass and what this future has to do with the present situation. The Jeremiah text is different. Is it a message at all? Isn't it more like talking to oneself, Jeremiah or God - who can distinguish between them? Whoever is speaking - he wonders how in all the world somebody can be so unreasonable as the people of Jerusalem. You wouldn't believe it:

*Where is there anybody who if he falls down does not want to stand up? ...
Why have this people gone astray...? They hold fast to deceit ...
Every one turns to his own course - like a horse plunging headlong into battle ...*

This is no messenger who is speaking here - rather somebody who is tormented by the question why the messages were not heard, at least were not taken to heart. Nor is it a prosecutor or a judge who is speaking here - rather somebody who is urgently searching what might make the people change their minds. This is not the only passage in the Book of Jeremiah where the prophet's role has changed: No longer does he play the part of a mere ambassador who has got to deliver messages irrespective of what feelings might be provoked in his own mind. He rather shows himself as a person who lays bare his soul and lets other people share the sentiments of his heart, a person who suffers because the people are so unbelievably foolish, taken all in all: a person who is swaying between compassion, hope and despair.

The Old Testament lesson from the Book of Ezekiel represents a similar understanding of the prophetic role. The attempt to win the people for a change of mind and a change of conduct, one could even say: to woo them, makes the tone yet more urgent and more emotional:

*Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD,
and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ...
Why will you die, O house of Israel? I have no pleasure in the death of any one ...*

When we have to describe what we mean by the prophetic existence of Christians or the church we tend to take for our benchmark only one strand of the prophetic tradition, namely that strand in which the prophet is seen as God's mouth and as "a watchman for the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 3,16). A prophet of this kind has his stand more on God's side than on the side of the people, him and the people are opposite sides, God lets him even see or hear what will come to pass in the future, and as the mouth of God he will with a thundering voice proclaim that this outcome is inevitable and that the people will harvest what they have sown. Examples to illustrate how in our days Christians and churches take this to be the true prophetic task are ready at hand. The other aspects of the prophetic tradition however are not so popular: to be bound up in sympathy and love with the people even when they have gone astray, to live in their midst and to get a feeling of what has gone wrong, the passionate zeal to lead them back on to the right path and in the right direction, the pain when once again they

are going astray and yet, after all, the fervent hope that it will not be too late. I wonder whether our prophetic existence couldn't do with some more ingredients of this other prophetic tradition, in other words: whether it wouldn't do us a lot of good if our prophetic existence was modelled more according to Jeremiah than to Amos.

III

But what happens if the questions at the beginning of our text were not rhetoric after all, if there were - even though you wouldn't believe it - a great number of people

*who if they fall down do not want to stand up and
if they go astray do not want to find the way again?*

What happens if there was no change, if - as Jeremiah puts it - there was *not one sinner crying remorsefully: 'Oh, what have I done?'*, but instead every one rushing headlong towards ruin? By the way, in German we have the same phrase: *Jemand rennt in sein Verderben* - obviously this is an experience well known everywhere in the world.

Many will answer: "Wait and see. Isn't it so: Fear always lets the danger appear bigger than it really is? Best follow the German saying: *Es wird nichts so heiß gegessen, wie es gekocht wird.* 'Nothing is eaten so hot as it was cooked.'" This is the strategy of playing things down. It is not the worst strategy. For it is true: Generally we are prone to dramatize risks. But the ability to distinguish with reliability between a *real* danger and a false *appearance* of danger is seldom to be found.

The debate about climate change can serve as an illustration. The overwhelming majority of experts argue that climate change has already begun and that it will have catastrophic effects if we don't take the appropriate measures immediately. True, there are scientists, politicians and journalists who question this prediction. They are drawing to our attention that regularly in history there have been fears of the world being at the brink of ruin and that - strange as it may seem - people like the thrill of this idea even though it never became a fact. It is true, too, that our trust in the stability of the natural rhythms is well founded in the Bible: *Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease* (Genesis 8,22). But we cannot wait until we have a 100 % proof for the climate change predictions, can we? It is enough to know there is a serious risk. Or do we want to wait until it is definitely too late?

The prophets were no friends of the strategy to play down risks. Particularly because they were apprehensive of the human inclination to take refuge to illusions. And again the debate about climate change is a good illustration. The prophets hated the lie of the "all gets well" mentality. There is a too late - just as in the reading from the Gospel where Jesus tells the story of the Last Judgment when the sheep are gathered on his right hand and the goats on his left. In the passage we have been looking at in today's sermon Jeremiah is still in the mood that he just can't believe it could really come true that the people will rush headlong into ruin. But the Book of Jeremiah is full of stories and prophetic words in which the prophet does not refrain any more from announcing the worst to come - if there were time enough I'd tell you the story how Jeremiah bought a vessel from a potter and smashed it before the eyes of the people and proclaimed: "Thus says the LORD: So will I break this people and this city ... so that it can never be mended" (19,1-15).

What does such a course of events do with the prophet himself? In the case of Jeremiah we can catch a glimpse of it. For the Book of Jeremiah contains a number of moving and even

shattering documents in which the prophet is reflecting his situation. The Bible scholars have named them Jeremiah's "confessions" - the prophet opens up his heart and lets us have a look at the tribulations he got into by being called as prophet:

*O LORD, thou hast deceived me ...
 Thou art stronger than I and thou hast prevailed ...
 I am reproached and mocked all the time for uttering the word of the LORD.
 Whenever I said: 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name',
 there is in my heart as it were a burning fire ... and I could endure no more ...
 Cursed by the day on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me let it not be blessed ..
 Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow
 and spend my days in shame? (20,7-18)*

This is what a prophetic existence can be like. Therefore - nobody urge to be a prophet. At the same time - nobody be mistaken: You cannot withstand or evade God's call. But if it is you whom God has chosen to be his mouth you can trust: God will not forsake you. One of Jeremiah's confessions - after the prophet has been very outspoken as to the burden and the despair of his existence - is followed by a word of strong assurance:

*Therefore thus says the LORD: ...
 I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze ...
 I am with you to save you and deliver you (15,20).*

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.