

# 4 A call to a prophetic life



All of God’s people are called to be holy, to be disciples, to serve. Some are called to be prophets, to listen and be attentive to what God is saying and then to announce God’s words to the people.

A large part of the Bible is linked to the work of prophets: in addition to the books of the Old Testament written by specific prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, etc), there are descriptions of prophetic ministry elsewhere – to the people of ancient Israel (for example, Elijah and Elisha, Moses, and Deborah), and also to the early Church. John the Baptist is a prophetic figure in the Gospels, as are Simeon and Anna in Luke 2.

## The ministry of a prophet

The prophets of ancient Israel were diverse bunch of people, both men and women and of all ages, with different characters and functions. Some were called “seers” – “one who sees”; the later and more common word for a prophet, *nabi*, is related to the word “to speak.” A prophet is someone who sees things others can’t see and who says things others can’t say, who speaks on behalf of someone else – on behalf of God. It’s a ministry of communication. Sometimes this involves *foretelling*, declaring future events – ones that would definitely come to pass or things that would happen unless the people repented (an example is Jonah’s proclamation that Ninevah would be destroyed in 40 days – only the city repented and was saved, Jonah 3). At other times it was more *forthtelling*, addressing specific social, political, and religious circumstances in ancient Israel and offering a critique which came from God.

Sometimes it was a bit of both, as when the prophet Huldah was consulted over a book – “the book of the law” – that was found during repairs to the temple during the reign of king Josiah, a time when Judah had very much lost its way. (We’re told Huldah was the wife of Shallum, the keeper of the wardrobe – sounds like a two-career couple.) Huldah’s message was tough, calling the people to account because they had abandoned God: God would bring disaster on the people, but not on Josiah – because he had humbled himself and asked

for God's forgiveness he would die in peace; all the bad events would happen after his death (see 2 Kings 22: 10-20). The prophet Elijah also offered this combination of foretelling and forthtelling (see 1 Kings 16-22).

We also encounter prophetic ministry in the New Testament, where it's included in a list of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:10), and mentioned several times in the book of Acts, for example Philip's daughters in Acts 21. There it related to receiving and communicating spontaneous revelations from God, words which needed testing or evaluation by other prophets before they could be received as the word of the Lord.



Someone like Ezekiel, who was active in the period of the Exile, was called to be a prophet of reality, helping the exiles in Babylon and those left in Jerusalem to understand that the destruction of Jerusalem was somehow God's judgement on the nation. But he was also called to be a prophet of hope, offering a vision of new life, of restoration and renewal.

- ❖ *Which Old Testament prophets are you familiar with? Do you have a favourite?*
- ❖ *Were you surprised to see women like Huldah and Deborah and, in the New Testament, Anna and Philip's four daughters numbered amongst the prophets? Does it make a difference knowing that women as well as men can be prophets?*
- ❖ *Ezekiel's calling to offer both reality and hope: where do we need that combination today?*

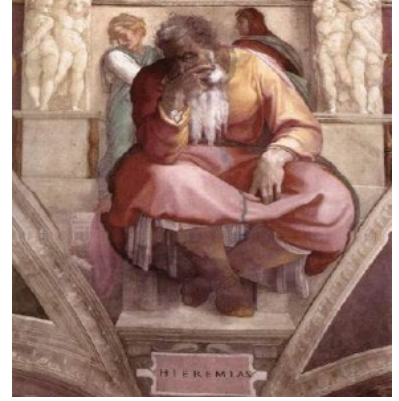
## **A biblical call story about the prophetic life**

## **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,  
'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak,

for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me,  
‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’  
Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;  
and the Lord said to me,  
‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.’



Jeremiah was active in the period leading up to and during the Exile, beginning to prophesy in 627-626 BCE (Jer. 1:1-3) and continuing until after the deportations of people to Babylon in 598 and 597 BCE. These were some of the darkest days in Judah’s history. Jeremiah was called to confront a corrupt political system and an immoral society that really didn’t want to hear what he had to say. To say his life was tough is something of an understatement. He was mocked, beaten, imprisoned, insulted by others who claimed to be prophets, had people plotting to kill him, and was thrown into a well. There was physical suffering and also the mental and spiritual burden of his care for a people who just wanted him to shut up and go away.

This passage recounts Jeremiah’s call, at a young age, to be a spokesperson for God. It follows the traditional pattern of a call narrative, including resistance to the call and then reassurance from God. There’s a strong sense of divine commissioning and empowering, but the rest of the book goes on to show how this call was severely tested by a number of crises that occurred over the course of his life and ministry. Jeremiah’s task was a two-sided one, involving both judgement and hope for his society: to pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, but also to build and plant.

- ❖ ***It’s clear that a prophet’s life is a difficult one: why would anyone want this job? Would you? Why do you think Jeremiah said yes to this call?***
- ❖ ***Jeremiah raises an objection (an excuse?): “I’m no good at speaking and I’m too young.” What excuses have you used to avoid doing something you were asked/called to do?***

## Other biblical call stories of prophets

Isaiah 6:1-13

Note the difficult message Isaiah is asked to deliver.

Ezekiel 1:1-2:10

Includes descriptions of strange creatures and a vision of a sweet-tasting scroll that Ezekiel was given to eat.

Amos 7:14-15

A shepherd taken away from his flock to speak on behalf of God.

## Modern day prophets

The prophets of former times gave voice to the demands of justice and spoke out on behalf of the marginalised and the forgotten. Sometimes they used prophetic actions as well as words to get their point across. The prophetic role



is also needed today, so that people can be urged to see things in a new light, to feel the weight of injustice and to take action against it. To be a prophet requires both courage and imagination, as what is often needed is an indictment of the way things are AND a vision for how things ought to be. Retired Archbishop Winston Halapua, who has campaigned vigorously for climate justice,

grounded on his Moana theology of the ocean, is one who exemplifies this work. He has also addressed the issue of gender-based violence in Polynesian communities, and supported multi-ethnic education in Fiji.

- ❖ ***Climate justice is one area where prophets are needed today. What other issues do you believe should be addressed?***
- ❖ ***Do you feel called to work in any of these areas?***

## A prophetic Church

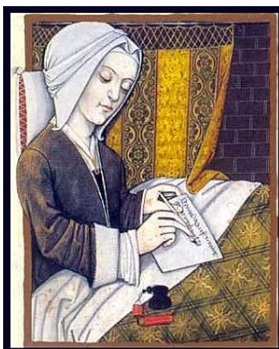
Not everyone may be called to a prophetic ministry – though there were Moses' words: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29) We could say, however, that the Church as a whole *is* called to be prophetic, to be a counter-cultural community which is clearly different from the surrounding society and its institutions. It's part of the Church's role to challenge the way our societies see the world and

what they value. There is a role for the public ministry of the Church and its members in addressing social issues clearly and urgently and calling for change. One example was the 1998 Hīkoi of Hope, in which Anglicans at every level of the church, from ordinary churchgoers to bishops, were involved in planning and leading the march, which drew public attention to the needs of unemployed and impoverished New Zealanders. The Hīkoi advocated for the creation of real jobs, affordable housing, better public health care, accessible education, and benefit and wage levels that lift people out of poverty.



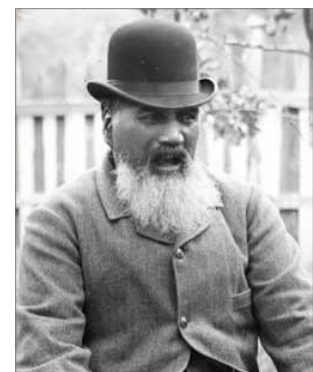
- ❖ *Where do you see the Church exercising a prophetic role today?*
- ❖ *Where would you like to see it doing this?*
- ❖ *What's your reaction to Moses' words "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets"?*

## Meet some prophets



**Mechthild of Magdeburg** (1210-1297) was a prophet and mystic who was part of a group of Beguines, women who lived in communities under temporary vows and devoted their lives to caring for the sick and the poor. She had a number of powerful religious experiences, starting from the age of 12, which were dominated by the idea of "all things in God and God in all things." Her sharp criticisms of abuses in the church – of church dignitaries and the religious laxity of the time – led to opposition and accusations of heresy (being a woman in a male-dominated world increased her difficulties). She joined the Cistercian nunnery at Helfte where she received protection and support in the final years of her life.

**Te Whiti o Rongomai** (c1831-1907) (Ngāti Awa), was a Māori spiritual leader and founder of the village of Parihaka. He was educated by missionaries and developed a strong love for the Bible. During the turbulent 1860s he sought a peaceful means of fostering Māori claims. Parihaka became a centre of peaceful resistance and a rallying point for many Māori as Te Whiti encouraged his people to resist peacefully the unjust occupation of confiscated land. This led to conflict with the government. On 5 November 1881 armed constabulary entered



Parihaka and were met by children chanting songs. Te Whiti and his assistant Tohu Kākahi were arrested and imprisoned without trial for a year. Later he continued the campaign of civil disobedience and was imprisoned again. He died on 18 November 1907.



**Martin Luther King, Jr** (1929-1968) was a leader in the US Civil Rights Movement. In 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, he led a peaceful protest against racial segregation on the buses. King advocated peaceful resistance, saying, “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Ghandi furnished the method.” Demonstrators staged sit-

ins, boycotts and marches, the most famous being the march on Washington in August 1963, where he drew on biblical language to articulate a dream of a better world. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.” In 1964 Congress moved to prohibit racial discrimination, and King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Four years later he was shot dead by a sniper.

**Dorothy Day** (1897-1980) has been described as the conscience of American Catholicism, “with a dual passion for social justice and intimacy with God.” After a wild youth, she became a Roman Catholic without abandoning her social and anarchist activism. During the Depression she grappled with the question of how she could reconcile becoming a member of a church often equated with the wealthy with the call she felt to do something for the poor? Together with fellow activist Peter Maurin she established the Catholic Worker Movement, a pacifist movement that combines direct aid for the poor and the homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf. Dorothy Day said, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”



***Think of someone you know who embodies the life of a prophet: what makes them so?***

## THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

## Closing Worship

*You might like to close each session by praying together. Here are some possible prayers.*

God of the desert,  
as we follow Jesus into the unknown,  
may we recognise the tempter when he comes;  
let it be your bread we eat,  
your world we serve and you alone we worship.  
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

God, you are working still,  
breaking down and building up;  
open our eyes to discern your hands  
so that we may take our place  
as labourers together with you.  
Hear this prayer for your love's sake. Amen.

God,  
give us work till our life shall end,  
and life till our work is done. Amen.

**E tō mātou Matua i te rangi  
Kia tapu tōu Ingoa.  
Kia tae mai tōu rangatiratanga.  
Kia meatia tāu e pai ai  
ki runga ki te whenua,  
kia rite anō ki tō te rangi.  
Hōmai ki a mātou āiane  
he taro mā mātou mō tēnei rā.  
Murua ō mātou hara,  
Me mātou hoki e muru nei  
i ō te hunga e hara ana ki a mātou.  
Āua hoki mātou e kawea kia whakawaia;  
Engari whakaorangia mātou i te kino:  
Nōu hoki te rangatiratanga, te kaha, me te korōria,  
Āke ake ake. Āmine.**

