

Our readings from Jeremiah and Matthew both make mention of prophets. We tend to think of prophecy as meaning the foretelling of future events, but in biblical language a prophet is best defined as someone who is speaking on behalf of God.

As we see from Jeremiah, not everyone who claims to be speaking for God is in fact doing so. Hananiah was telling the people what they wanted to hear, but it was not a true message from God. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was telling the people things they did not want to hear but was speaking the truth.

There is a very real sense in which we, as members of the body of Christ, are called to be prophets. Sometimes that will mean we have to say things that are unpopular. Particularly when we 'call out' conduct that is contrary to God's will.

Recent events have highlighted the extent to which racism is still part of our society. And part of the problem is that we tend just to ignore it, perhaps trying to persuade ourselves that it isn't really happening or it's not our concern. At my University, some of us have gone through what is called 'active bystander' training, and we had to confront times when we have turned a blind eye, or passed by on the other side of the road.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus says, "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me ... And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward". These words call to mind the parable of the sheep and the goats later in Matthew's Gospel (in chapter 25), where Jesus speaks of those who did – and those who did not – provide help to him.

Those who helped say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?". Jesus replies, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'. Those who passed by on the other side of the road say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?". Jesus replies, "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Today's Gospel reading also speaks of welcome. We are called to be people of welcome. Welcoming others into our lives can mean standing alongside them, walking with them in their journey. It may not be easy for us. They may be people we find it difficult to relate to, or even people we dislike. The journey may be a difficult one.

The Methodist Covenant service says that "Christ has many services to be done ... some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves".

Let us commit to speak God's words, even when we know the message will be unpopular. Let us commit to speak out against injustice, bigotry, prejudice. Let us commit to be people of welcome, people who welcome others into our lives, people who truly share God's love with others.

Amen.