

Over the last two weeks we have been reflecting on spiritual gifts, their variety and place within the life of the Church. One of those that frequently appears in the lists of spiritual gifts is that of prophecy.

This must be one of the most misunderstood words in the biblical vocabulary. In fundamentalist circles it is often seen in terms of foretelling the future, reducing the scriptures to a sort of spiritual Old Moore's Almanac. Following this line of thought obscure texts, taken out of their context are deemed to refer to specific events, often implying that the world is about to come to a speedy and dramatic end – generally to the detriment of a group other than your own.

Prophecy is much more about seeing events, seeing people differently. Seeing events, seeing situations as God sees them. It is about recognising, recognising significance of events. The prophets not only recognise, he or she then declares this to those who care to listen. The role of the prophet is often a lonely one, very often not a particularly welcome one. In this regard, I often think back on words of a former member of Ahoghill Parish, the late Terrence O'Neill, prior to the last election he fought as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. 'Ulster stands at a cross roads and Ulster will have to choose.' His society was not ready to listen and thousands have reaped the consequences.

In our Old Testament lesson the prophet Ezekiel speaks of a vision of the glory of the Lord filling the Temple. This is in the context of an earlier vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the Temple in Jerusalem. This is all part of a powerful reflection by the prophet on the rapidly deteriorating social and religious fabric of Jerusalem in the period leading up to the fall of the city to the invading Babylonians and the subsequent exile. The departure of God's glory, leaving the city to the consequences of apostasy, is a picture of divine judgement on a broken and failing society. The corresponding vision of the glory of God returning to the Temple is an affirmation that God's purposes, even in judgement are for the ultimate redemption and healing.

Going to our Gospel reading, approaching as we are the Feast of the presentation of Christ in the Temple, is that delightful account in St Luke's Gospel of Mary and Joseph bringing their first born child to dedicate him to the Lord, and with that the response of Simeon and Anna when they see the child. In the context of the scene they would not have been the only ones in the Temple that day when Mary and Joseph appeared with their new born son. Some, wrapped up in their own concerns, will not have noticed them, others may have paused to admire. But Simeon and Anna, alone among the crowd, see not just a child but the child, sensing in this child the fulfilment of all their expectations. In a way that defied definition, they sensed that God was in this child – they had a sense of the glory of the Lord entering the Temple.

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

I want to hang to this fundamental vocation of the prophet, this idea of seeing situations, people, circumstances as they really are, sensing God present and active in the world and calling on others to do the same. I then want to move on to the portion set for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lesson today on our lesson sheets. Over the last couple of weeks we have been reading chapter 12 of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Church at Corinth in which he has reflected on various gifts of the Spirit and their place within the life of the Church. He then goes on to urge his readers to strive for the greatest gift – we have before us Paul's wonderful exposition of Christian love. Love, without which all other gifts are meaningless, noisy gongs or clanging cymbals.

I recall a woman in Ahoghill whose marriage I had celebrated a couple of years previously, telling me how on occasion she would go into what she called her huffing corner and reflect on this passage that had been read at her wedding. ‘Love is **patient**, love is **kind**, love never **takes offence** ..’

It is through and in love that we get a deeper insight into ourselves; it is a gift of spiritual growth as

Paul uses that image of seeing in a mirror, dimly