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Prophetic witness in weakness

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This article addresses the possible link between prophetic witness and weakness (one can also speak of vulnerability), and expands on reasons why this connection holds much promise for a theological engagement with the question regarding the prophetic role of Christians and churches in the public sphere in South Africa today. With this in mind, the various sections underscore the need for a form of prophetic witness that emphasises respectively prophetic solidarity, prophetic imagination and prophetic performativity. In the process, the article puts forward three statements or theses as invitation for further reflection and conversation, drawing on, among others, the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Giorgio Agamben, Emmanuel Katongole and Judith Butler.

Introduction

The topic of this article – 'Prophetic witness in weakness' – raises vital questions about what it means for believers and faith communities to witness to their faith in the public sphere. For Christians, churches and ecumenical bodies, in particular, this brings the question to the fore about what it entails to be faithful witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the kingdom Christ inaugurated and embodied – also in light of the persistent and life-denying realities of oppression, injustice, economic inequality, misrecognition, violence and polarisation. The theme of prophetic witness, furthermore, invites in-depth reflection given the pervasive feeling that, in our day, we lack prophets and prophetic communities with moral and spiritual integrity and power. Today's 'prophets', some would say, are more interested in profits and in making money than in speaking truth to power. A remark attributed to the comedian Trevor Noah on social media expressed this sentiment well: 'Instead of feeding the 5000 hungry people like what Jesus did, today's prophets are being fed by 5000 hungry people.'

But the crisis regarding what authentic prophetic witness might entail also runs deeper. For many there is a sense that, given the complexities of our life together and the concomitant stubborn socio-political and economic challenges, we are not exactly sure what the content of our prophetic witness should be. One can also rightly ask how prophetic witness should take on concrete form in our pluralistic society (cf. Welker, Koopman & Vorster 2017). For others, however, the concern for prophetic witness might take a backseat, as faith communities struggle merely to survive and be financially sustainable. For some it might be the case that in hearing and seeing the way in which some Christians respond in a simplistic, ignorant and often arrogant way to what they see as the prevailing ills in society, they sense that this speech and actions lack a convincing moral core and force. At the same time, many might be inspired by the civil courage of those who are able to embody something of the spirit of the ancient prophets, as they stand for justice and with the wronged – even if many of them are not necessarily directly affiliated with churches or religious communities. Given these varied responses, the call to reflect on the theme of prophetic witness therefore seems apt and timely.

It should be noted, though, that it is important that we historicise and contextualise our reflections on prophetic witness. When we speak of prophetic witness today, we are aware of the fact that references to the witness of the biblical prophets abounded in South Africa in the struggle against the injustices of apartheid. The Kairos Document of the mid-1980s, for instance, famously proposed the need for a 'prophetic theology', over against what was seen as the reductions – or more strongly put, the idolatry – of respectively state theology (that legitimised apartheid) and church theology (that protected the status quo and focused on reconciliation without justice). Such a prophetic theology, it was argued, 'must name the sins of apartheid, injustice and oppression in South Africa' and 'announce the hopeful good news of future liberation, justice and peace, as God's will and promise, naming the ways of bringing this about and encouraging people to take action' (The Kairos Document 1986:18).

Following the transition to democracy, the emphasis on prophetic theology became less pronounced, with the language of the need for a critical solidarity with those in power finding stronger resonance in public discourses. As John de Gruchy (2016) observes:

> A common complaint about the ecumenical church in South Africa is that while it had exercised a prophetic ministry against apartheid, after 1994 it withdrew from critical public engagement … Within a few years a new 'state theology' began to emerge in support of the state and its policies … There were charismatic prophets a plenty, but the voice of the prophets of social justice were at best muted. (pp. 4–5)

Tinyiko Maluleke suggested in a public discussion that the church after 1994 might have been 'outmaneuvered by democracy' (quoted in Boesak 2017:211). In the last decade or so, however, the voice of some church leaders and ecumenical bodies against, for instance, corruption and power abuse in government became more amplified, resulting in several public statements. Yet, it is probably not unfair to say that, in the eyes of many, most churches and ecumenical movements are struggling to give form and force to their prophetic witness in the public realm. When we use the notion of 'prophetic witness' in public discourses in South Africa today, it is therefore important to note that this is not done in a historical vacuum, but that phrases like 'prophetic theology' and 'the prophetic role of the church' have a specific historical genesis, development and (contested) reception.

In addition, any reflection on prophetic witness in South Africa today should take into account the way in which social protest movements, including the more recent #FeesMustFall movement, invite engagement with discourses regarding decoloniality and intersectionality. The powerful role of social media and technology in more recent protest movements and justice quests furthermore raises questions about what prophetic witness could mean in such a context beyond merely entailing the action to 'like' a moral cause on Facebook.

The focus of this article is not merely on prophetic witness, but more specifically on prophetic witness *in weakness*.[1] In essence, I want to affirm this link between prophetic witness and weakness (one can also speak of vulnerability), and expand on reasons why I feel that this connection holds much promise for a theological engagement with the question regarding the prophetic role of Christians and churches in the public sphere in South Africa today. This is especially true for a form of theological engagement that wants to draw on the biblical witness and its interpretation and meaning. With this in mind, I will proceed in three parts with the various sections underscoring the need for a form of prophetic witness that emphasises respectively prophetic *solidarity*, prophetic *imagination* and prophetic *performativity*. In the process, I will put forward three statements or theses as invitation for further reflection and conversation, drawing on, among others, the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Giorgio Agamben, Emmanuel Katongole and Judith Butler.

1.It should be noted, though, that our understanding of 'weakness' needs to be qualified. There is a form of weakness that is born out of fear, timidity or a lack of civil courage that stands over the type of prophetic witness that this article is concerned with. The 'weakness', which is the focus of this article, is related to commitments to what is seen as the heart of the gospel's message.

Prophetic solidarity: Speech born from pain

The first thesis is as follows: An adequate theological description of prophetic witness requires an identification or solidarity with the times. Prophetic witness requires identification with the hope and crisis of our age as well as with the people to whom we witness. This implies that prophetic speech is often born of relational pain.

While serving for a year, a pastor in an expatriate German congregation in Barcelona, the 22-year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer, gave a lecture in November 1928 on the theme 'The tragedy of the prophetic and its lasting meaning'. This is one of Bonhoeffer's lesser-known texts, but I think it is pertinent to our discussion. In this address, Bonhoeffer starts out by saying that the issues he would like to address are profoundly contemporary. Moreover, he (Bonhoeffer 2008) adds:

> we should have so much love for this contemporary world of ours, for our fellow human beings, that we should declare our solidarity with it in its crisis and its hope. (p. 326)

For Bonhoeffer, Christians should not stand aloof from their age, but identify its crisis as their crisis, its hope as their hope. The events of recent decades, Bonhoeffer continues, have indeed plunged them into an unprecedented crisis. It is as if the rug has been pulled out from under their feet or, using a different metaphor, they are shipwrecked and are horrified to see how utterly at sea many of them are. Amidst this crisis, the question arises for Bonhoeffer (2008):

> Who dares to make blanket judgments about the burning problems of ethics, the questions of the right to wage war, the problem of economic competition, concerning the new social order, the education of a new generation or the mysteries of sexuality. (p. 327)

The implied answer to his rhetorical question is of course that no one could provide an unequivocal answer to Europe's contemporary fate.

After acknowledging this, Bonhoeffer turns to Israel's prophets in search of possible signposts to point one at least in the right direction. These prophets, Bonhoeffer continues, also 'wrestled with God and with their own age, an age in which everything was out of joint' (Bonhoeffer 2008:328; cf. Vosloo 2017). Bonhoeffer is especially interested in what he describes as the tragedy of the prophetic experience. This tragedy follows from the prophets' terrifying alliance with God that prompts their strange words. Therefore, these prophets often cried out to God in profound and distressing despair. The outcry of Jeremiah comes to mind: 'You have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have

prevailed' (Jr 20:7).[2] Although Bonhoeffer does not use the term, one can say that their tragedy is related to relational pain – the pain resulting from, on the one hand, their wrestling and struggling with God, and, on the other hand, their identification with the crisis of their people and their times.

The Afrikaans poet, N.P. van Wyk Louw (1937), expressed something of the tragedy and terror of the prophet's existence in his poem '*Die Profeet*' ['The Prophet']:

> Maar ín my, ín my, O Heer …
> het U Woorde en woede en skrik gekom
> en my neergeslaan tot my knieë genadeloos,
> totdat die nag my in 'n donker hoop
> gehurk, en aan die snik gevind het.
> [*But in me, in me, O Lord … your words and wrath and terror came / and mercilessly struck me down to my knees / until the night found me in a dark bundle, weeping*]. (p. 26, [*author's translation*])

Not withstanding their pain, the prophets did not stay silent or silenced. The mystery and power of prophetic proclamation and action arise from their ability to speak and act in spite of, or maybe even because of, the tragedy of their existence. From their pain, one can say, speech was born. Their speech was not cheap speech that came easily because of their disdain for their people or from some kind of macabre delight in bringing a word of judgement to the people. Rather, it was wrought out of their alliance with God and their solidarity with their age. As Bonhoeffer (2008) expresses it:

> These were men in whose gloomy gaze and sorrowful brow words of suffering were deeply etched; yet they were also men to whom the words of Tasso [*a character in one of Goethe's plays*] applied in the highest sense, namely, that
> When in their anguish other men fall silent
> A god gave me the power to tell my pain. (p. 330)

By linking prophetic witness to weakness, we are able to see that authentic prophetic speech does not arise from a detached criticism, but from the painful solidarity with the people and the times. The German theologian and bishop, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, also expresses this idea when he states that prophetic speech in its biblical perspective is a type of connected criticism based on a relationship which displays love and respect for the addressee. As he (Bedford-Strohm 2010) notes:

> The addressees usually sense very well whether the critical passion of the prophetic voice is generated by love for people or disgust for people. Only the former can claim to be a prophetic voice in the biblical sense. (p. 5)

The authentic prophetic voice, to reiterate our first statement, therefore requires solidarity with the addressees and their times. In this sense, we can speak of the prophet (or the prophetic community) as truly contemporary. The Italian political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (2009), writes in this regard as follows in his essay 'What is the Contemporary?':

> Those we are truly contemporary, who belongs truly to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. … But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (p. 40)

Those who coincide fully with their epoch are not, according to Agamben, contemporaries, because they are not able to keep their gaze on their age. Their identification or solidarity with their times are not of such a nature that they can see their epoch for what it is or really grasp the challenges arising from it. Of those who are truly contemporaries, we can say, quoting the Cape Town philosopher Martin Versfeld's essay 'The Idea of the Contemporary' (1991): "

> They help us to see our way better. They provide us with a more acceptable interpretation of who we are. It is not so much we who resuscitate them, as they who keeps us alive (p. 58)

Moreover, the contemporary is the one who perceives not only the light of their age, but also, and especially, its darkness and obscurity. Agamben (2009) notes in this regard:

> The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century … the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him … the contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time. (p. 45)

To perceive the darkness in the present is therefore, for Agamben, what it means to be a contemporary. It is, however, not merely about perceiving the darkness in a fatalistic or despairing way, but to perceive in the darkness 'a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us' (Agamben 2009:46).

To summarise the first thesis: authentic prophetic witness requires that we are contemporary in the sense that we stand in solidarity with the times with, as Bonhoeffer said, its crisis and hope. Prophetic speech result from the pain and tragedy of this identification, albeit that this identification is characterised by a realistic yet hopeful vision, enabled by being in time and timely, but yet not fully coinciding with one's time for the sake of one's time.

Prophetic imagination: Hope born from lament

Prophetic witness, one can say, requires identification with our contemporary world and our contemporaries in its crisis and hope. The true contemporary, it was argued, helps us to see our time in a more realistic way – not only its light, but also its darkness. This brings us to the second thesis: Authentic prophetic witness is imaginative. It helps us to see

2.Compare Dietrich Bonhoeffer's sermon (2007:349-353) on Jeremiah 20:7 in London on 21 January 1934. Towards the end of this sermon, Bonhoeffer (2007) says: If only the word and the will and the power of God can be glorified in our weak, mortal, sinful lives, if only our powerlessness can be the dwelling place of divine power. Prisoners do not wear fancy clothes, they wear chains. Yet with those chains we glorify the victorious one who is advancing through the world, through all humankind. With our chains and ragged clothes and the scars we must bear, we praise the one whose truth and love and grace are glorified within us … The triumphal procession of truth and justice, of God and the gospel, continues through this world, pulling its captives after it in the wake of the victory chariot (p. 353).
This sermon was written in the tension-filled days before Hitler gave a reception for church leaders, and Bonhoeffer strongly opposed the church leaders' uncritical alliance with the Nazi government.

better and in the process it is hope giving. This hope, however, is not cheap optimism, but rather a hope born from lament.

Willie Jennings (2010:6) argues in his book *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race* that Christianity in the Western World lives and moves within what he describes as 'a diseased social imagination'. For Jennings (2010:8) 'the Christian theologian imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways had to adapt, become fluid, even morphed into the colonial order of things'. We have been enculturated, Jennings suggests, into sick ways of seeing. Maybe we therefore can say that not only our memories, but also our imaginations are in need of healing and part of our diseased imagination is that we have been socialised into confusing Christian hope with a type of optimism that jumps over pain, suffering, anger and tears.

In his book *Born from lament: The theology and politics of hope in Africa*, Emmanuel Katongole (2017:xiv) grapples with a kind of hope that is not abstracted from suffering and lament. In the process, he seeks to display 'the practice of lament as the work of hope in its theological and practical dimensions in the context of Africa's turbulent history'. Within the broader frame of his argument, Katongole examines in one of the chapters the prophetic laments of Jesus and Jeremiah. With regard to Jesus, he refers to the passage in the Gospel of Luke (19:41, 42) where we read 'And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."'[3] Earlier in the gospel, Luke tells of Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, but it is in this text that we read that Jesus actually weeps or, more precisely, wails. The Greek word is *klaiō* (which is interpreted as 'a loud expression of pain and sorrow'). This is a strange action for a man (because boys do not cry), but also stands in stark contrast with the crowd's jubilant response as they recognise him as the messianic King (Katongole 2017:146).

Scholars have suggested several reasons for Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem such as that he was filled with dread for his impending death or that he wept due to compassion for the city in light of its impending destruction. However, these explanations do not account for the rest of the sentence: 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!' Katongole (2017:147) points out that the English translation hides the odd form of this sentence what Bible scholars calls aposiopesis or 'broken syntax', indicating 'a breaking off of speech due to strong emotions such as anger, fear, pity, and so forth'. In the Lukan account, we are therefore presented with the clash of two emotions and realities. On the one hand, you have the chanting of the crowds, unable to grasp 'the things that make for peace'. They carry on with business as usual. On the other hand, you have the wailing of Jesus. In this juxtaposition, Luke places Jesus within the prophetic tradition, specifically that of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, whose weeping over Jerusalem offers the interpretive context for Jesus' lament.

Katongole therefore turns to Jeremiah's weeping poems:

> I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me.
> Is there no balm in Gilead?
> Is there no physician there?
> Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?
> O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears,
> That I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. (cf. 8:21–9:11)

What emerges for Katongole from texts such as these is the vision of a prophetic ministry grounded in lament. Katongole points out that, what he describes as Jeremiah's lament-saturated ministry, operates on several levels. For our purpose here, I will not go into the details of Katongole's rich discussion. Suffice it to say that he (Katongole 2017:162) argues that 'Jesus not only casts himself as a kind of Jeremiah, but as the embodiment of the entire prophetic tradition.'

It is worthwhile quoting Katongole (2017) at length:

> What Jesus' wailing points to and dramatically enact is the vision of a new society, a fresh vision of peace founded on a new covenant of self-sacrificial love … It is a decisive political intervention – a critique of present political logic and systems built on military force, problematic alliances, an economics of greed, and an absence of truth … this new vision of society is born of the throbbing pathos of God, which Jesus dramatically expresses in his wailing as he enters Jerusalem, but later quietly participates in by way of his passion, crucifixion and death. (p. 162)

The tears of Jesus and Jeremiah offer, in Katongole's words (Kantogole 2017:163), 'an alternative epistemology', that is, not a detached or mere theoretical knowledge, or mere technical skills, or mere ethical competency. It is rather linked to 'the intimate personal knowledge of and participation in God's anguished love for God's people'.

Katongole concludes his discussion by pointing out how something of this kind of way of knowing, this epistemology, is at work in the life and nonviolent struggle and advocacy of Archbishop Christopher Manzihirwa of Bakavu in Eastern Congo. The prophetic logic that critiques the politics of violence and promises of a new social reality is reflected in Manzihirwa's oft-quoted saying: 'there are things that can be seen only by eyes that have cried' (Katongole 2017:163).

Prophetic witness, to reiterate our second thesis, is thus grounded in a hopeful imagination that is born out of lament – it is a form of seeing in weakness, a vision through eyes that have cried. Such an emphasis challenges cheap optimism; yet, it is not to be equated with despair. As Denise Ackermann (2003) writes, with reference to the context of worship:

> Instead of worship services that are unremittingly positive in tone, there is room for mourning and protest – not as an end in themselves – but as a holding together of loss and hope. Lament does not end in despair – it ends in affirmation and praise hard won. (p. 123)

3.The New Revised Standard Version translates the verse: 'As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: If you, even you, have only recognized on this days the things that make for peace' (Lk 19:41, 42).

Prophetic performativity: Resistance born from vulnerability

Prophetic witness is grounded in a prophetic solidarity with the times (the first thesis) as well as in a hope-filled prophetic imagination in which, in the midst of suffering, people are enabled to see otherwise (the second thesis). This hope is born from lament and this lament is not merely a sentiment or a cry of pain. Rather, to use Katongole's words (2017:xvi), 'It is a way of mourning, of protesting to, appealing to, and engaging God – and a way of acting in the midst of ruins.'

But what does such acting in the midst of ruins imply? This brings us to a third thesis: Authentic prophetic witness is about more than mere words, utterances and even public statements. Rather it is aligned with embodied presence and action. It is performative resistance. It performs the witness to the reign of God in history in a way that results from and draws on experiences of being vulnerable.

Judith Butler (2015) argues in her book *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly* that:

> when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public spaces (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity. (p. 11)

For Butler (2015) precarity signifies that:

> the politically induced conditions in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death … Precarity is the rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities. (pp. 33, 58)

In an essay 'Rethinking vulnerability and resistance', Butler points to the fact that vulnerability is enhanced by assembling in order to protest. Protest groups are, for instance, vulnerable to policy brutality. Yet, vulnerability emerges already prior to such assembling, given the precarious position in which people live. Hence her claim: 'we are first vulnerable and then overcome vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance' (Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay 2016:12). Although Butler is aware of all the misuses associated with the term *vulnerability* (often to the detriment of women), she argues against the idea that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance. Rather, vulnerability, 'understood as the deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment' (Butler et al. 2016:22). For Butler, vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and able to act at the same time. One cannot think about resistance without thinking about vulnerability, and by 'thinking about resistance, we are already under way, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist' (Butler 2016:27).

In the introduction to this article, I remarked that any reflection on prophetic witness in South Africa today should be historicised and contextualised. This implies that we should take into account, like the prophets of old, the precarious situation of the most vulnerable to forces of exploitation, misrecognition and injustice. Some would add that this implies participation in a bodily way in the social movements that grow from experiences of being vulnerable which, in turn, implies risking to become even more vulnerable through performing resistance.

For the church's prophetic witness, also in South Africa today, the question of how it risks vulnerability is paramount, as it seeks to name and resist the forces of dehumanisation, oppression and injustice. Such vulnerability, resulting in the words of the Belhar Confession, from standing where God stands, namely, 'against injustice and with the wronged' implies, furthermore, that prophetic witness is not merely about prophetic speech abstracted from bodily presence and participation in solidarity with the vulnerable. This requires, to use Bonhoeffer's well-known phrase (2010:52), 'a view from below'; to see the world 'from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering'.

In the process, the church might learn more about the 'weapons of the weak' (cf. Scott 1985). This implies a movement towards what Nico Koopman (2008:240–254) has called 'an ecclesiology of vulnerability'. For Koopman vulnerability is not merely based on the vulnerable environment in which the church finds itself; rather, vulnerability is part of the essence of the church, because the church lives in solidarity with vulnerable human beings and within vulnerable ecosystems. The emphasis on vulnerability invites Christians and the church to witness with greater gospel integrity to the liberating logic of the reign of God. In performing the values of the kingdom, we are opened to the possibility of experiencing the strange strength in being vulnerable partly due to the way it fosters relationships and alliances characterised by intersectionality and interdependency. In the process, gestures and symbolic actions are often powerful means of witnessing in public spaces. One is, for instance, reminded of Jeremiah carrying a yoke as symbolic gesture in order to challenge the cheap speech of the false prophets (cf. Jr 27).

For Christians and churches, this emphasis on prophetic performativity in which resistance is born from vulnerability, poses questions such as: Where are our bodies?; With whom and how are we bodily present?; How do we deal with our own vulnerability as a result of injustice and the abuse of power?; and Do we risk becoming vulnerable as a result of our solidarity with others in their precarity?

Conclusion

In a reflection on the work of Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities (and their care for people who are differently-abled), the theologian Stanley Hauerwas (in Hauerwas & Vanier 2008) writes:

> When the poor and weak are present, they prevent us from falling in the trap of power – even the power to do good … I take this to mean that the politics of gentleness cannot be a triumphalistic politics. (p. 98)

The subtitle of the book in which this essay appears is 'The prophetic witness of weakness'. In light of the title of this article, one can say that prophetic witness *in* weakness is indeed intertwined with the prophetic witness *of* weakness.

There is a temptation to view prophetic witness as merely a bold and courageous speaking of truth to power. Such a form of prophetic witness can easily become triumphalistic.

Hence, as this article have argued, taking its cue from the proposed theme, authentic prophetic witness requires prophetic solidarity, prophetic imagination and prophetic performativity. This solidarity, imagination and performativity need to be qualified though. True prophetic speech results from solidarity with the times; it is born out of relational pain. True prophetic imagination is a hopeful imagination born from lament and true prophetic performativity is marked by resistance in vulnerability.

Let me conclude with a word from the 16th century reformer, John Calvin. In his discussion of Christ's prophetic office in his *Institutes*, Calvin refers to the words of Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord the Lord has anointed me to preach to the humble, … to bring healing to the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberation to the captives …, to proclaim the year of the Lord's good pleasure. (Is 61:1–2; cf. Lk 4:18)

Calvin observes, with reference to Christ's prophetic office: 'We see that he was anointed by the Spirit to be herald and witness of the Father's grace' (McNeill 1960:496). This reminds us that prophetic witness is not a hard word of judgement directed to us or by us. Even as word of judgement, it is embedded in God's loving pathos, in God's grace.

N.P. van Wyk Louw (1937) ends his poem '*Die profeet*' (that depicts the terrifying nature of the prophetic existence) with the following words:

> ek moet die bitter brood van twyfel eet …
> maar ek, aan wie U self U werk verklaar het,
> gaan dán met 'n nuwe heilige wete uit:
> dat hierdie duisternis van my U lig
> en waarheid is, hierdie verwarde spraak
> U suiwer en deursigtige woord en sin;
> dat al my onrus is die saamwaai met
> U magtige wind –
> En Heer, ek staan weer sterk
> in die ander genade wat U gee.
>
> [*I must eat the bitter bread of doubt … but I, to whom you yourself declared your works, then goes out with a new holy knowing: that this darkness of mine is your light and truth, this confused speech is your pure and transparent word and logic; that all my unrest is the blowing together with your mighty wind – and Lord, I stand strong again in the other grace that you give*] (p. 28, [*author's translation*])

It is this 'other grace of God', one can say, that holds the key to the redemptive nature of prophetic speech and action, and provides a clue to the mystery of the strange strength of prophetic witness in weakness.

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