

**False Prophets****Matthew 7: 15 – 28**

Aristotle stated the principle that “nature abhors a vacuum,” arguing that there’s no such thing as empty space. He was concerned about the laws of physics.

Four hundred years later, Jesus turned that principle into a story about human experience. If you cleanse a house of an evil spirit, he suggested, you’d better be sure that you fill the space you’ve cleaned out with something wholesome of your own choosing. If you don’t, you may be sure that a flood of evil spirits will rush back to take possession, to squat, in the empty space you’ve created. You begin by thinking you’ve done yourself a favour by getting rid of something that’s fouling up your life and you end up in an altogether worse plight - at the mercy of resurgent bad habits, unmanageable levels of debt, exploitative or abusive relationships, or simply the stalking presence of despair. Human nature abhors a vacuum too.

In the worlds both of politics and religion we are going through “empty” times. We used to settle on a definition of politics as “the art of the possible.” Who’d agree with that these days? It’s almost a hundred years since Sir Ernest Benn, uncle of the late lamented Tony Benn, expressed things differently. “Politics,” he said, “is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it wrongly, and applying unsuitable remedies.” Rather gloomy you might think. But is it?

The post-1945 consensus is breaking down. The Soviet and the British empires have withered away, people are questioning the Bretton Woods arrangements and the relevance of international law, neo-liberal capitalism has favoured the rich at the expense of the poor and seems to have run its course. The emptying space is speedily being colonised by a flood of evil spirits in the shape of ugly nationalism, strong-armed leaders or international terrorism. Nations are sharply divided – Turkey, the USA, Venezuela, Ukraine are all cases in point. Our own country is rapidly becoming a dis-United Kingdom where the centre seems unable to hold while the Brexit process threatens to tear us apart. We’re living in an increasingly binary world with whole nations split right down the middle with people in angry opposition to each other. Solutions to our problems are being sought on the basis of fear, protest, disagreement and

reproach. There seems no Big Idea to rally round, very little to focus our thinking or direct our way. In a word, we're living in a vacuum. And we may be sure there are malign forces, dark nets, evil people who'll be looking for ways to inhabit that space and to impose their will. And we, ordinary people, might well be in danger of welcoming them out of a felt need for strong leadership, a safe pair of hands, someone who can command the storm, steer the ship of state, bring order out of chaos. And so, here they are, the seven evil spirits waiting to rush in to inhabit our minds and our societies in these dangerous times – populism, exceptionalism, isolationism, protectionism, escapism, hedonism and me-ism which, once in the driving seat, will bring greater disorder than anything we've known before. When you sow the wind you must expect to reap the whirlwind.

Things are not that different in the world of religion.

At the beginning of my ministry, you could go into any bookshop and find the shelves that were devoted to "Religion" or even "Christianity". All that's changed. Nowadays, everything comes under the heading "Body, mind and spirit." In one shop which I visited some years ago, there were six bays devoted to a veritable smorgasbord of spiritual titbits. It was mind-boggling. In Bay One there were books on astrology, psychics, channelling and life after death; Bay Two offered Nostradamus, divination and prophecy, pendulums, runes, Feng shu'i, tarot and dreams; in Bay Three were myths and legends, sacred places, Celtic myth and witchcraft; Bay Four was more sharply focused on self-help and shamanism; Bay Five concentrated on spiritual masters, Krishnamurti, meditation, hypnosis and crystals; and, at last, Bay Six offered comparative religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Sufism and Zen. Oh yes, and Christianity. I noticed two missing items – kabbalism and mindfulness.

When I began my ministry, I was aware of the "mainstream churches," - the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church; Methodism, Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Baptist and Brethren fellowships; and, as ever in Wales, just about all of these denominations existed in Welsh as well as in English equivalents. Nowadays, we have a plethora of additional and non-denominational churches with prophecy, redemption, apostolic and Pentecostal written into their titles. Within two hundred yards from my new home I have a Church of God of Prophecy and the Woodside Green Christian Centre which offers services in "Twi and English (bi-lingual). Nor should we forget mega-churches like Hillsong and KICC.

With all that in mind, we might be forgiven for thinking that Christianity is alive and kicking and a unifying force in the land. But a closer look reveals something much more worrying. The religious world (across the board) is populated by cranks and charlatans, quick-fixers and quack-doctors, purveyors of false and unrealisable promises, guilt-inducers and flat-earthers – in a word, false prophets. They stalk the land crying “Lord, Lord.” They wear the trappings of religion but, like wolves in sheep’s clothing, they are ready to pounce vulture-like on vulnerable people. Their readiness to spout out clear answers to complicated questions makes them attractive to all of us living in such uncertain times. They know exactly how to prey on our psychological anxieties and neuroses. As it says in the scripture, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.”

Everything was in turmoil in the days of Jesus too. There was constant unrest among the Jewish people with insurgent bands threatening to undermine Roman rule. Galilee, where Jesus came from, seemed to be at the very centre of these activities. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see how the social and political tremors of Jesus’s day represented a foretaste of the disaster to come. Just a short while after the events recorded by Matthew, events reached crisis point; the Romans could take no more. They moved in and razed Jerusalem to the ground. This was what the scripture called “the abomination of desolation.” The atmosphere at the time of Jesus’s arrest was already very fraught – he was ultimately charged with activities that were alleged to be undermining Roman rule. Against the backdrop of guerrilla warfare being conducted by the Zealots, this would have touched a raw nerve. In today’s gospel passage we can sense that Jesus is aware of the difficulties to come; he warns his friends and followers about the danger they faced not from the Imperial authorities, the occupying Romans, but from those who would rise up within their own communities, fellow-Jews, who’d seek to exploit people’s fears and set themselves up as messiah-figures. Jesus is crystal clear on this. They are to be denounced and resisted. What they call prophecy is not enough, casting out demons won’t do the trick either, nor will the performance of miraculous deeds. As Saint Paul would say a short while later: “Even if I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic power, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains,

and do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

You can't be clearer than that. Shout “Lord! Lord!” as much as you like. If you do not do the will of the Father, it will all be in vain. If our lives are not driven by love (for God is love) then our protestations of faith will count for little. And “love is patient and kind, it is not boastful or arrogant, it doesn't insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” When all's said and done, love is the hallmark of true faith, the loadstone of true hope. Nothing is greater than love. Nothing. And it is by the criterion of love that we should judge all those whom come claiming to have spiritual authority or to be acting in the name of God.

Let me end with a cautionary tale. Before I became a Methodist minister, I was a teacher. I taught Anglo Saxon literature in the University of Wales. The longest and most developed of all poems in the Anglo Saxon language is called *Beowulf*. It's a very dramatic story of human courage and heroism on the grand scale.

A village community is being terrorised by a monster called Grendel. It can't go on. So one of the lads of the village offers to track Grendel down and put an end to him once and for all. The people promise him great gifts if he can pull this one off and with their praise and gratitude still ringing in his ears, he sets off. He finds Grendel in his underwater lair and a great battle ensues. It ends with Beowulf victorious and there is wholehearted joy in the village. In the manner of those times a great party is called to celebrate this great deliverance. It's a loud party with a great deal of boasting, tale-telling, rough talk and booze. They drink themselves silly, they're stoned out of their minds, they enter the realm of delirium and fantasy. And still the party goes on.

Unknown to the merry makers, the mother of the monster Grendel has been stirred by the loss of her son into a furious rage and she comes looking for revenge. She inflicts untold damage on the village and reduces everyone to fear and trembling. Soon Beowulf is back in action and pits his very his life in a terrible struggle with Grendel's mother. Victory is finally won. The hero dies in action. But the real moral of this tale for us is a simple one. We should never rest on our laurels. We should not allow a life of pleasure to lead us into the ways of laziness or to the dropping of our guard. We should not allow a

vacuum to form into which even worse evils than the ones we've got rid of can undermine and destroy our well-being.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

As for doing the will of God and bearing the good fruits of love for which we were created – my next sermon will spell that out in greater detail.

For now, it's enough to remind ourselves to be on our guard, to watch and to pray, to keep awake. We're living in troubled times and, like a thief who breaks into a house in the middle of the night when all its inhabitants are asleep, so too the false prophets and wolves in sheep's clothing can find their way past our defences. We must not let that happen.

God help us.

**Amen.**