

The Prophetic Element of the Carmelite Charism

A Study of the Marian Heritage of the Order

SOURCE: [The British Province of Carmelite Friars](#)

CHAPTER 3: Evolution of the Order's Marian Consciousness

Every Christian shares in the threefold dignity of Christ - priest, prophet and king. We Carmelites have had a particular prophetic thrust from the very beginnings of our Order coming from the Elijan aspect of our spirituality. The figure of Elijah the contemplative has had a great impact on our spirituality. From him we learn to listen for the voice of God in the unexpected. God was not in the earthquake or the great fire or the mighty wind but in the sound of a gentle breeze, as it was known for many years, or "in silence" as it is more commonly translated now. The experience of Elijah has given courage to many generations of Carmelites. He believed that he spoke in the name of God and he had won a wonderful victory on Mount Carmel. However, he also had to learn how God acts and so when his victory was not followed by even greater success but by serious threats on his life, he became depressed. He went into the desert, sat under a tree and wished he were dead. However, God did not allow him to give up. The angel of the Lord, who can come in many different forms, gave him the necessary strength to continue his journey.

When he arrived at Mount Horeb, he had to learn that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19,9) Elijah answered, "I am zealous with great zeal for the Lord God of hosts ...for the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have thrown down your altars and have put your prophets to the sword. Only I remain and now they are seeking to kill me." The Lord, after having come to Elijah in the sound of silence, reminded him that that there were at least seven thousand people in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal or kissed him.

In recent years the Carmelite Family has become aware of the importance of the Prophet Elijah as an inspiration in the work of justice and peace. His contemplative experience impelled him to prophetic action. He denounced without fear the actions of the powerful people of his day and he brought the light of the Word of God into situations of sin. The story of Naboth's vineyard (1 K.21) is a good example of Elijah's prophetic activity. King Acab wanted

Naboth's vineyard for himself but Naboth did not want to sell his patrimony. The Queen, Jezebel, mocked her husband and challenged him to show who in fact was King in Israel. The queen had hatched a diabolical plot to accuse Naboth unjustly of blasphemy and to assume the control of the vineyard when Naboth was out of the way. The Prophet Elijah came on to the scene when Acab had taken the vineyard into his possession and he condemned Acab for abusing his authority. Obviously this was a very courageous step. Proclaiming the Word of God in certain situations can be very dangerous. The stories regarding the Prophet Elijah help us to focus specifically on the prophetic aspect of our vocation. We see a man who translated his contemplative experience into prophetic action and therefore is an excellent model for all Carmelites who are involved in an active apostolate.

To work for justice is an essential element of the preaching of the Gospel. This has been underlined innumerable times in church documents. However, those who work in the area of justice and peace often meet with incomprehension or even antagonism from their own brothers or sisters. Why is not easy to explain but this fact has obscured a very important element of our work as religious.

God is not deaf to the cry of the poor and neither must we be deaf. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, God says, "Is not this rather the fast which I desire: break unjust fetters, untie the thongs of the yoke, set free the oppressed and break every yoke? Does it not consist perhaps in sharing your bread with the hungry and to bring the oppressed and homeless into your own home, in clothing those who are naked without neglecting your own people?" (Is. 58, 6-7). We live in God's world and creation has been entrusted to us as God's stewards. This does not mean that we have complete liberty to use or abuse the goods of the earth without thought for tomorrow or for future generations. We have certain rights but also certain duties towards the rest of creation. The Word of God is concerned with the whole of life and not just spiritual things. Elijah, the man of God, is at the same time a contemplative and also a prophet. Perhaps because he was a contemplative, he was able to be a prophet. Thus Elijah is a model for all Carmelites.

Jesus Christ is for us the primary model of what it means to be a prophet. We are above all followers of Christ and therefore we must seek to put into practice his teachings every day. Jesus Christ is priest, prophet and king

because in him all the promises and roles of the Old Testament are fulfilled. He is the one in whom the work of the prophets reaches its culmination. The prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed the Word of God in particular situations. They warned and condemned but also comforted the people in times of difficulty. They sought to turn the hearts of the people towards God and they spoke with severity or with tenderness according to the situation.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God, God's yes to the world. By means of his death and resurrection we are redeemed and reunited with God. The Word of God does not return to Him without having completed what it was sent to do, according to the prophet Isaiah. This is true in a sublime way in the case of Jesus Christ through whom the whole of creation finds once again the road which leads to God. The prophets described the personal relationship which God had with the people as like a marriage. In Christ, God and the human family are united in a way which goes way beyond what the prophets spoke of and they can never be divided.

A prophet is someone who proclaims the Word of God in particular situations. Do not trust a person who wants to be a prophet or who believes himself or herself to be a prophet. A true prophet is one who is sent by God. This mandate gives a certain amount of confidence but also profound humility with the realisation that the choice of God is not based on merit but that God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to Him. Pride is the sign of a false prophet.

The Word of God is like a double sided sword which penetrates between the bones and the marrow. Often this is most uncomfortable first of all for the prophet but always for those who listen. Some people are called to be prophets like those of the Old Testament but I think that this is a rare vocation. Nevertheless we are all called by means of our Christian and Carmelite vocation to share in the prophetic function of Christ, bringing the Word of God into every situation in which we find ourselves. This does not mean finding an explicit Biblical text for the situation but it means to give God the space to shape our hearts according to His Word so that our very presence becomes a word from God.

All of this is easy to say but how do we accomplish it in practice? We accepted Christ's call to follow him with the best of intentions. We had high ideals and generosity. Over time perhaps the experience of life has changed our ideals somewhat but hopefully has not destroyed them. Fundamentally

the mission of all Christians is the same - to continue the presence and work of Jesus Christ in our world. The way we do this can and must change as circumstances change. No individual and no religious group can on its own fully reflect or fully represent the fullness of Christ and therefore every religious family has its particular charism which represents one aspect of the work of Christ. We cannot change our charism which is the gift of God to us for the world. Our charism defines the form of our participation in the mission of the Church. Mission and charism are intimately linked.

An essential element of the Carmelite charism is the contemplative aspect which has an intimate connection with the prophetic dimension. By responding to the challenge of the contemplative dimension of our vocation we become a word from God to our society which is the fundamental mission of a prophet.

To become a word from God it is necessary to enter a process of interior transformation and consent to the presence and action of God in our life. This is the work of God but God will not do it without our consent. This process can be painful because through it we come to see ourselves as we really are and not as we would like to be. The great danger is that we will seek to run away from this encounter with ourselves because we do not want to accept what is being revealed to us. This process of transformation includes a disintegration of what is false within us so that the true self can come to birth.

The false self is a defence which each one of us constructs around ourselves against a perceived danger, that is a threat to our need for esteem, our instinct for survival and our need to control our environment. If we think that these basic human needs are not being satisfied, and they never will be satisfied because they are insatiable, they can never have enough of a good thing, then we will seek to satisfy them in whatever way is open to us. We will seek esteem and affection from our families and friends, from the members of our community, from our superiors, from the people we serve in our apostolic work. We will seek signs of security everywhere. We will seek to have control over our own lives and also the lives of those people who enter our sphere of influence.

The false self is very subtle and can find a whole host of reasons for not changing. It is even more subtle when it manages to convince us that it does not exist. The false self is perfectly content in whatever way of life it happens

to find itself. It can wear a religious habit - it does not matter - it simply changes its way of working. In the Gospel when Jesus says that one must lose one's life in order to find it, it is the false self which must die in order to discover the true self which is created in the image of God. However we do not want to lose this false self because it is the only self we know. For this reason the spiritual journey, which is simple is at the same time very difficult.

We do not fulfill our prophetic vocation simply by preaching or when we work with the poor and the emarginated, vital though that work is. We fulfil our prophetic vocation when we become a word from God and this involves a death in view of a resurrection, a new life in the image of God.

The prophets of the Old Testament spoke to the imagination. They asked the people to imagine another possible future. For example the prophets Isaiah and Mica spoke in a time of war of a time of peace when "from their swords they will forge ploughshares and from their blades, scythes. No nation will lift the sword against another nation and they will not learn the art of war anymore...." When the future is very dark, the prophets bring hope. However in order to do this, it is necessary to see beyond the present situation to the reality which lies beneath. This is the faith of Our Lady in the Magnificat who sees the proud cast down, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty when those who see only the external appearances would believe the opposite to be true.

Carmel is famous for its Marian devotion which is expressed in many ways. The greatest devotion is to be conformed to the object of our devotion. Titus Brandsma said that the vocation of a Carmelite was to be another Mary. The "yes" of Mary gave the necessary space for Christ to be born. Through her, God now has a human face. Our devotion to Mary must not stop at the imitation of her virtues, though that is very important. We must allow Christ to grow within us so that we become transformed in him so that we can say with St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me". (Gal. 2,20) In that way we will be a word from God, a tabernacle of the presence of God in the world. In that way we will live our prophetic vocation.

I believe that St. Thérèse of Lisieux was a prophet sent by God to remind the world of the simplicity of the Good News when it was obscured by human ideas of holiness. In the time of Thérèse, there was great emphasis on moral perfection and purity as a condition of approaching God. Thus the spiritual

life was hard and rather grim. Thérèse was aware that she was not able to climb the huge mountains of spiritual perfection, but did not become discouraged but entrusted herself to the Merciful Love of God who raises little ones to the top of the mountain.

Abandoning ourselves into the hands of God with the desire of being whatever God wants us to be, disposes us completely to the action of God. Then we will be a word from God in every situation in which we find ourselves. This might mean that we are called upon to do something very important or perhaps we will be forgotten by everyone. Remember the example used by Thérèse of the different types of flowers all of which give pleasure to God. Some flowers are bigger or brighter than others or with a more beautiful perfume but God takes pleasure in all of them.

Fulfilling our prophetic vocation as members of the Carmelite family is a great challenge for each of us but it is not something which we can do with our own strength. We will be faithful to our vocation inasmuch as we consent to the purifying and transforming action of God in our lives. God will shape us and form us to become a word from Him. In this process Our Lady is the greatest example we have.

As St. Thérèse said, "Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of heart which makes us humble and small in the arms of God, aware of our own weakness and daringly confident in His Fatherly goodness." (NV)