

Theme: Voices People Ignored

I wonder if you have ever been ignored?

I suppose all of us have had some experience of this. We have had something to say, but someone else has **spoken over** us. Perhaps we tried to attract the **teacher's attention**, but someone else was asked to speak.

Maybe you had a great idea, but you were **sidelined**.

Perhaps more than anyone else, **parents of teenagers** know what it is like to be ignored.

Prime Minister Key has announced the **general election for 20 September 2014**. From now until then politicians of all stripes will be on the radio, TV. I can't take all the political grandstanding so I am going to do my best to ignore them all until a couple of weeks prior to the election.

The prophets of the OT knew what it was like to be ignored.

In fact when God was calling Ezekiel to be a prophet he said, ***the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me***, Eze 3:7.

Not always, but very often, the prophets of God were ignored.

Big Picture Bible series

We are now halfway through our big picture bible series.

We are trying to look at the big picture of the bible in 14 easy pieces to give ourselves an overview of what the bible is about.

We are not looking in great detail at any one thing, but trying to stand back and see a panoramic view of the people, themes and teaching of the bible.

In the OT there are three big offices that God used to help lead the people – Prophet, Priest and King.

We have seen the failure of the priests.

The first high priest **Aaron failed miserably**. When Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet with God, Aaron and the people thought God had destroyed Moses and quickly set up their own religion by

making a **golden calf** to worship. It is amazing how quickly Aaron and the people abandoned God – perhaps a sign of things to come. Not all the high priests failed, but many of them did. All of them were sinners. All of them had to go through a special ritual of cleansing and forgiveness on the Day of Atonement. They too were subject to human frailty and sin.

Not only that the sacrificial system they ministered in was flawed. On the **Day of Atonement**, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, one ram was slaughtered as a sacrifice for sin of the people and another symbolically had the sins of the nation placed on it and it was driven out into the wilderness.

The flaw in the system was it had to be repeated year after year. It couldn't once and for all deal with sin.

Then we saw that the kings failed.

God wanted Israel to be different from other nations, to live in relationship with him and to stand out as a people who were socially, morally and religiously different from all the other nations. Yet we read in 1 Sam 8, the people wanted to be like the other nations and to have a king to rule them.

Doing this they were rejecting God as their king.

When we look at the kings we find:

Saul the first king was rejected by God for **disobedience**

David, the most beloved king had **moral failings**, committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah murdered.

Solomon who was known for his wisdom, unwisely married foreign wives and ended up worshipping their gods to placate them. In doing this he **ceased following God with all his heart**.

After these three kings the kingdom divided over the issue of high taxes.

10 tribes of Israel became the Northern kingdom.

2 tribes Judah and Benjamin became the Southern Kingdom of Judea.

While there were a handful of good kings most of them refused to follow God, to listen to him or to listen to the prophets he sent.

Here is a key to help you make more sense of the OT.

When we read a book in our modern age we expect it to be linear, that is to start at the beginning and as we read on to read about later times until at the end we have reached the conclusion. So if you were reading a book on WW2 you would expect it to start at the beginning of the war in 1939, move through the German invasion of Poland, France and other nations, then have the response of Great Britain and its allies, with the USA joining in and all progressing towards the surrender of Germany in May 1945. It all happens along a linear timeline.

The OT does not work like that and the way it is set out makes it a little difficult to understand.

The OT the history of the kings begin with

1 & 2 Samuel – basically the stories of Saul and David

1&2 Kings – tell the stories of the rest of the Kings

1&2 Chronicles – tell the same stories as 1 & 2 Kings, from a different perspective.

Smaller books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther – tell stories from the times after the exile.

Although in the OT the writing of the prophets physically follow these books in terms of how we print the bible – they actually lived during the times from 1 Samuel through to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Just to complicate this even more, the prophetic books are not in chronological order.

Rather they are ranked in order of importance with the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel first, followed by the Minor Prophets.

While the book of Joel appears after Isaiah, Joel actually prophesied 100 years earlier.

Isaiah is first because he is the major prophet.

I can imagine that some of you are thinking this is too complicated, I will never understand it.

I have to admit – I have trouble understanding it.

There were two kingdoms Israel and Judah, who over a 500 year period had 39 kings. Over this period of time we have books recording the prophesies of 16 prophets.

Understanding how it all fits together isn't easy.

In their own day the prophets were often ignored because they had an unpopular message. Today they may be ignored because we find it hard to understand the context in which they were writing.

If it is hard – why bother?

It is not actually as hard as it sounds. While knowing about the context can enrich your understanding, it is not essential in order to be inspired, encouraged and spiritually uplifted by their message. Secondly, there is a deep wealth of spiritual insight which connects with our humanity, moving us, challenging us and helping us to have a better understanding of God and his love for us.

Today we are looking very briefly at the 3 Major Prophets.

Isaiah gets straight to the heart of the human problem in chapter 5 and the parable of the vineyard.

Basically this story is a picture of God's love for Israel, Israel's rejection of God and the judgement they face because of it.

In the OT a vine or a fig tree is often used as an image of the people of Israel.

Just as the owner of the vineyard has done everything necessary for the vineyard to succeed, so to God has done everything necessary for his people to flourish.

But they are unfruitful.

Whereas Israel as a vine fail, in the NT Jesus says I am the true vine who produces good fruit. Jesus succeeds where Israel fails.

The failure of the vine points to the problem of sin, and this is an issue all the prophets' face.

Jeremiah points to this sin in chapter 9 referring to the nation as adulterers, unfaithful, liars, who weary themselves with sinning.

It is as if the prophets hold up a spiritual mirror so that the people come face to face with the problem of sin.

Isaiah points out sin is so rampant and has turned the tables on doing good that the people *call evil good and good evil*, Is 5:20.

Time and again the prophets are called to tell the people to stop sinning, to tell the priests not to sin or to go into the presence of the king and tell him not to sin.

This did not make the prophets very popular.

Part of the problem we have reading the prophets is we are confronted with our own sin and we hear them stressing how serious that sin is.

Isaiah is also known for some very uplifting verses.

Isaiah's call and vision of heaven give us deep spiritual insights.

He gives us a picture of God's throne with the angels singing, *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" (Is 6:3).

Isaiah and many other prophets stress the glory and majesty of God.

Isaiah also gives us the servant songs, pictures of a messiah who will humbly serve God and so achieve the salvation of many. We find these in Isaiah 42 – 61

Those who have been Christians for a while will recognise the way these chapters are speaking so clearly about Jesus.

If you are new to the bible or haven't read these before, you will find these very interesting and enriching. You may be surprised at how accurate and detailed these ancient words are in pointing to Jesus.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken

by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Is 53:3-5).

This was written 700 years before Jesus was born, yet it gives us a rich insight into the life and ministry of the messiah.

The historical setting of Jeremiah was complex

Judah was a vassal state of Assyria which was declining in power. So briefly under Josiah a godly king Judah was independent, then a vassal of Egypt and finally a vassal of Babylon.

Right at the outset of the book God tells Jeremiah that he has a difficult task.

It speaks of a fight, a struggle with the king and almost everyone else in the land as he proclaims God's message.

In Chapter 38 we find that Jeremiah's message had so annoyed the city officials and the king, that he was lowered into an empty well and left to starve to death.

Being a prophet was not an easy task.

Jeremiah gives us some wonderful images of God.

We see God as a potter.

God sent Jeremiah to the potter's house to watch what happened.

As the potter shaped the clay into a jar something went wrong and it was misshapen. So the potter took the clay and formed it again into a different pot. God spoke using this image saying, *O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (Je 18:6).*

This is a wonderful picture of how God can form and reform our lives, our church – working to make us how he wants us to be.

Paul drew on this image in the NT saying, *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? Ro 9:21.*

This points to God's sovereignty in shaping our lives.

When the people of Judah were captured and taken to Babylon, being crushed and having no hope, God spoke to them through Jeremiah,

*For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, **plans to give you hope and a future.** Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.** I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, (Je 29:11-14).*

People of many generations have found hope and encouragement in these words.

They reveal to us the gracious nature of God who sovereignly is working out his plan to give hope to people and to do good for them.

Ezekiel used extravagant imagery to convey God’s message.

Ezekiel lived in Babylon and prophesied among the exiles of Judah. In a hopeless situation he spoke words of hope.

But he was also very clear that the reason for the destruction of the temple and their being taken into Babylonian captivity was their sin.

Ezekiel is the proverbial prophet of doom.

Chapters 4-24 all speak of the sin and judgement which is upon the people. Page after page he speaks of sin and judgement.

He is scathing in his description of the nation likening them to the most promiscuous of prostitutes and using language not normally heard in a church.

The 20 chapters of doom and judgement upon Israel are followed by another seven chapters of doom and judgement on the nations around them.

For the most part this is not a cheerful book, it is stressing the seriousness of sin and that judgement is unescapable.

But then it ends with 15 chapters of good news, of how God will act to restore them to the land and how a new temple will be built.

Among the vivid imagery we have the vision of the valley of dry bones. Ch 37

God revealed this valley of skeletons, an ancient battlefield strewn with the dead. This is valley where all was decomposed to the point where the bones were dry.

All hope here is lost. Nothing humanly can be done in such a situation yet God told Ezekiel to prophesy – speak to the bones.

And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’ ” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. Eze 37:7-10

To the people of Israel, held captive in Babylon, and feeling like spiritual dry bones, this was a promise in a vivid picture of how God would call them to life, give them breath and life as he lead them back to live in their homeland Israel.

In his calling at the beginning of the book Ezekiel describes the glory of God as seen in the vision of the living creatures at the throne of God.

Angelic beings, moving in unison with the speed of lightning, with wings that touched, an light moving over them like fire.

On the ground before them where something like wheels with wheels covered with eyes and jewels.

High above them was a sapphire throne surrounded by brilliant light with the appearance of a rainbow; and from there came a voice, a call to Ezekiel.

Towards the end of his prophecies Ezekiel returns again to a heavenly vision of a new temple in which God would dwell.

He describes this temple in great detail giving its dimensions and describing its gates, walls, rooms and decor.

And then in Chap 43 the glory of the Lord descends and fills the temple with his powerful presence.

In this there is healing for the heartbreak the people suffered when they saw the earlier temple destroyed.

Here is a wonderful promise of restoration.

Not only is the temple to be restored but Ezekiel also speaks of how the people will be restored.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. (Eze 36:26-29). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Why is about 1/3 of the OT taken up with prophecy?

We often think of prophecy as telling about the future.

While it is true there is a future aspect to prophecy, it is equally true that the prophets spoke in their own day, to their own people about what God wanted from them at that moment in time.

The words of the prophets were not time capsules to be hidden in the ground awaiting a future time; rather they had very real meaning to the people of the day in which they were written.

I know it is oversimplifying things, but a prophet basically spoke to the people of his day saying repent from your sin right now, or this is what God is going to do about it. Or we might say, if you choose to take the path of sin today, then you will face judgement tomorrow.

We might say that 1/3 of the OT is taken up by God warning, imploring, commanding people to stop doing wrong and giving ample warning of the consequences of their sinful way of life.

All this revelation from God is a sign of his grace, goodness and kindness, sending his messengers to help the people of Israel to remind them of who God is and of who they are as God's chosen people.

What difference does this make to us?

The prophets make up a significant part of the OT and if we neglect them we are missing out on a big portion of God's message for us. If we think of our Big Picture series as a 14 piece jigsaw puzzle, the writing of the prophets are a big piece.

I admit it is not easy to understand the prophets, but I know that it is worth trying.

Some of our most **precious pictures of God** are found in the descriptions of the prophets.

Some of the deepest **insights into our human condition** are found in the prophets.

We will not understand **the ministry of Jesus**, if we don't read the descriptions of the messiah which were written hundreds of years before his birth.

Jesus saw his life and ministry as a fulfilment of what the prophets wrote about. To understand this we need to read the prophets and through them to see something more about Jesus.

Jesus didn't just appear on the scene without any warning, rather for hundreds of years, in different ways the ancient prophets spoke of, and pointed to, Jesus.

The prophets spoke of him so clearly that one of his early disciples commended Jesus to a friend saying, *We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*"

Jn 1:45

If you haven't read the prophets before, then I suggest you read

Isaiah 42-61. These prophecies will take you deeper into the heart of God.

We are in the season of Lent and will soon we will celebrate Easter – these prophecies will bring the Easter story alive to you in a new way.

Let us be a church, and a people who read our bibles, even the bits that take extra effort to understand.

Let us be a church, meeting in homegroups, were we study the bible together, looking more deeply into the word of God.

Let us be a church who have a rich understanding of what the bible tells us about our Lord Jesus, finding insights about him from Genesis to Revelation.