

# 11. PROPHETIC SOCIAL ACTION.

## 1 KINGS 21

You may be familiar with pastor Martin Niemoller's words spoken in 1930's Germany as Adolf Hitler's brutal fascism began to spread. *"In Germany the Nazis came for the communists and I didn't speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I was a Protestant so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me – but by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."*

Today we will consider God's insistence that there *is* a prophetic voice against unrighteous social structures and *for* social justice, and we will also ask how this might be relevant for us as we plant churches.

Here in 1 Kings 21 we have the story of a great injustice; one which ends in the murder of a helpless and innocent man by a head of state. There is a terrible catalogue of evil here.

- The greed of an already wealthy ruler
- False accusation
- Scheming of the powerful to steal property
- Corruption of the highest officials of the land
- Lying testimony & character assassination.
- The murder of a man & his sons (2 Kings 9v26)

So God speaks to the prophet Elijah and commissions him to go the King to confront, expose and pronounce judgment on him and his evil wife.

### **The Biblical Prophets**

There is a burning passion in God's heart for social justice & righteousness. *We see this carried by all the Biblical prophets.* God wants His voice to be heard against injustice and on behalf of the oppressed and the powerless. He will hold men and women to account. As a consequence the prophets didn't just preach religious sermons. They plunged into the great issues of their day. There was no division between religion & politics, sacred & secular, They were passionate about social justice and righteousness. They also looked ahead to a day when God's glorious rule of righteousness & justice would reign on earth. *"See a king will reign in righteousness."* (Isaiah 32v1)

### **Jesus and the Kingdom**

It was against this background that Jesus came preaching *"the good news of the Kingdom"*, and taking up the prophet Isaiah's words: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* (Luke 4v16-21)

This was Jesus' kingdom manifesto. In his ministry the glorious, righteous rule of God was breaking in. He displayed the same passion for social justice as the prophets, whether overturning the tables of the temple mafia or wading into the teachers of the law and Pharisees: *"Woe to you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness."* (Matthew 23v23)

## **The church as a prophetic presence**

The church is now the agent of this Kingdom. We are commissioned to carry on Jesus' work. We are His prophetic presence in the world.

But how do we go about this work of advancing the Kingdom rule of God? Answer - by a combination of means:

- By prayer: (Matthew 6v10)
- By proclaiming the gospel (John 3v3)
- By living Spirit filled lives (Romans 14v17)
- By prophetic social action: (Luke 4v18f)

We can be strong in one or two of these areas, but It is when the church *combines* these that society feels the benefit of the glorious kingly rule of God and we get a foretaste of heaven; the presence of the future.

## **The era of Wilberforce & Shaftesbury**

It is fascinating to examine the impact of the church in the UK in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Great figures emerged in that period, providing outstanding moral leadership. But their roots were Biblical, their lives were prayer soaked, they mobilised local churches and city missions, and their primary motivation was the glory of God.

William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury were two such "Kingdom men". They and their supporters were in the forefront of calls for radical social justice. They felt themselves called by God. Wilberforce said: *"God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners;"* and by that he meant more than table manners!

Lord Shaftesbury is famous for the establishment of the Factory Acts but he was also either the founder or the leading light of the Bible Society, the YMCA, and an association for the Disabled. He was also vice president of the NSPCC and the RSPCA. *"Shaftesbury was at the head of virtually every campaign to get humanitarian legislation through Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century. His unflagging efforts ensured the outlawing of employment of women and boys under ten in the coal mines; regulated lunatic asylums; placed the 10 Hours Acts on the law books; established government grants to enable a thousand young people from the ragged schools to emigrate and start a new life; and introduced one of the first pieces of legislation to improve housing conditions, when he guided through Parliament*

*the Common Lodgings Houses Acts.*” (Michael Le Roy. ‘Fighting On All Fronts’ 1986)

During this period many ministers set up relief agencies attached to their churches. After 1798 charities were formed at an average of six a year until by the 1860’s there were over 500 concerned with alleviating the conditions of prostitutes, the poor, children, factory workers and many others. So much was developing that the Charity Commission was appointed in 1853 to oversee it.

*“The strength of the period of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury was that Christians operated at every possible level, through the direct work of the church, personal care, organised care, charities, campaigns, politics and Parliament. Wilberforce & Shaftesbury were not quiet organisers of comfortable charities. They fought powerful men and evil social structures by every legitimate means in their reach. They forced a significant shift in thought and action on concerns of justice.”* (Michael Le Roy.)

## **Church Planting.**

David Devenish writes *“As we plant churches, we encourage each one to have some form of kingdom ministry amongst the needy it is not possible to plant New Testament style churches effectively without this dimension.”* He gives over a chapter of his book to examples of church based social action going hand in hand with preaching the gospel.

However, when we start out planting churches resources are stretched & limited. It can take us all our time just to maintain the basics of family life and church in the early stages. We can find all this talk of prophetic social action a bit daunting. So how can we prevent ourselves being overwhelmed and at the same time begin to take our first steps, even if they are small?

1. Remember that we are part of a larger body. There are many things that we can do better together than apart. We are part of a family of churches in *newfrontiers*. We are also members of the Evangelical Alliance who co-ordinate action in the UK and have an influence that no one church working in isolation could possibly have. TEAR Fund is, of course, an arm of the EA. We can also work together locally with other churches e.g. recently we linked up with several Morpeth churches to arrange training in Debt Counselling and to plan to co-ordinate any work in this area.

2. Notice who God has brought among us to care for. They may be new believers with a lot of baggage from the past. They may be parents with disabled children or a wife with an abusive husband. They may be people with poor social skills or personal hygiene. They may be people addicted to alcohol or drugs. They may be ex offenders. They may be people from other nations who are finding life hard in an alien culture. City Church in Newcastle / Gateshead has a ministry among Iranian asylum seekers; but they didn’t set out to have one – God brought Iranians to them.

3. Be alert to those God brings among us to galvanise us. People are the primary resource God gives to take us into new territory. They can open new doors. Already we are beginning to see this happen among us. People with various skills and experience and passions are joining us.

4. Find out what the big issues are in our community. Debt is undoubtedly a major issue today, not least in the north east. Addiction is another. There are family life issues – divorce, single parents. Anti-social behaviour is a big concern in many communities. Over some issues we can make contact with local MP's and councillors; but we must learn to affirm those who hold public office; they are more likely then to respond when we express concerns and make requests.

5. Look out for opportunities to show small kindnesses. Small kindnesses can develop and take us much further than we ever imagine. It may be to a neighbour or a stranger; it may be to someone from another nation or a newcomer to the area. It may be to a homeless person or someone whose family has just broken up or to a victim of crime. Every time you take some personal initiative you are the local church in action.

6. See how God changes us as we pray. As we pray "*Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*" we may find God stirring us in fresh ways.

**John Wilthew. June 2006**