

Some Thoughts on the Nature of Prophecy

We read that God doesn't do anything without revealing his counsel to his servants the prophets (Amos 3:7). This raises a question. Given that Covid19 is a major event, might this mean that in the absence of an advance warning from God, the current pandemic should be considered a natural occurrence, and that God is not particularly involved?

We should note first that the Hebrew word for counsel (*Swd*) in this verse is used of the conversation of a group of intimate friends and also of a plot by a conspiracy of evildoers in the Old Testament. It is a discussion in council, made in confidence, not a public announcement, a statement that might be broadcast on the evening news.

But not all prophecies are of one kind. Prophecy takes place when someone grasps what is on God's mind. It often involves the unexpected. We have an example of this diversity in Genesis. Having just revealed to Abraham that Sarah his elderly wife is going to have a son (nothing is impossible for the Lord), God asks himself, shall I also reveal to Abraham what I am going to do (18:17)? He then tells Abraham that he is going down to visit Sodom and Gomorrah to see if what they have done is as bad as the report that has reached him. Abraham rightly grasps that this is a hint of judgement to come, and intercedes: surely, it is impossible for the Lord of all the earth to do something unjust and punish not just the sinners but the righteous as well (verse 25)?

Abraham has heard two things from God, both to do with what he thinks is impossible. Note that in the first instance, news of the impending birth and even the date are clearly given, whereas in the second case, Abraham only receives an impression and the actual form of the impending disaster is not revealed. Neither prophecy was widely known.

The former degree of clarity does occur in the Bible: for example, warnings of the exile that will come if the people disobey are frequent. But we also have instances of the latter, where a coming event is not so clear. Paul commented that we only prophesy in part, seeing through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:9 & 12). Things are not always made transparent to us.

So what might a prophecy from God of our current situation have looked like? Anything from a clear message to not much more than a hint, it seems. The verse in Amos is more to do with the latter than the former.

We also need to be certain that no prophecy was in fact given. We read of a city under siege which was saved by a poor wise man whom nobody remembered afterwards (Ecclesiastes 9:15). Did he hear something from God that was helpful maybe? It was a good thing that the people in charge took notice of his advice. Not many of the people will have heard about his contribution.

Although some prophecies are shared widely, as in the biblical prophetic books, others are more low key. Prophecy does not need to be dramatic. It can come in a still small voice (1 Kings 19:11-18).

Personally, I think that my not having heard of a prophecy circulating in advance is insufficient grounds for concluding that God has no hand in our current crisis. See what you think. We all need to make up our own minds on this. Your feedback appreciated. Thank you.

David Pennant, Woking