

## Bennochy church 3rd January 2016

Have you wondered how warp drive works in Star Trek. In case you are wondering what that is, it is a propulsion system that allows them to travel faster than light. Einstein said it was impossible. It is also one of the possible means of time travel. As you approach the speed of light, the theory is, you would slow down relative to those who are not moving, therefore in effect you would begin to go backwards. Got it! I hear you wondering, what has that to do with Old Testament prophecy!

Well, there are two ways of reading any prophecy. Its original meaning, determined by context. In other words, what was actually happening at that point in time, and, a future interpretation, of the same words, in a totally different context. In other words, reading back into the text and applying these words to the present day.

What prophecy is not, is predicting the future. At one level, in the world of the author, it reads the signs of the times and says, if what is happening, continues to happen, then a likely outcome can be determined. Original prophecy is about the present, not the future. The other level of interpretation, is future generations using the same words and applying them to a new event, in their present moment. So we in a new context, when we read these words, we are concerned, not about the past, but the present.

In a sense, time and space are bent, that allow these words to have meaning in the past and the present, at the same time. Maybe the greater reality is this, these words intercept and cross over each other, to reveal to us the truth of an eternal God that cannot be contained within our understanding or constraints of time.

One of the great motifs (images) used by the prophets was the idea of the people returning home. It has been described as "poetic anticipation". This would be a moment of salvation for God's people. Out of exile; Jeremiah here talks about the ancient nation of Israel or Samaria, exiled by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC; out of exile, the people of God would return home, to the holy city of Jerusalem. What rejoicing there would be! From captivity, once again, there would be freedom. They had travelled this road before, out of the slavery of Egypt. Those scattered, would be returned home, not a great nation of power, but one that weeps and prays. Along smooth roads they will travel, by streams of water, to their promised land.

Any prophecy requires to have words of hope. If you are in captivity in a foreign land, these are words you want to hear. Jeremiah says, one day God will save his people. Out of Babylon they would come. It might not be imminent. Prophecy does not have a timescale. But Jeremiah's words anticipate a new historical possibility, beyond the prohibitions of great empires.

In spite of the reality that faced them, the promise of God will one day be fulfilled. That is the hope of prophecy.

Let me introduce a bit of warp drive thinking! The people of God did return home out of exile. They were in Babylon for about 80 years, until the Persians empire came to power. Their foreign policy was different and they allowed people to return back to their homeland. However, this prophecy of Jeremiah was not fulfilled at that time. Jerusalem was in ruins. So was the temple. There was no smooth journey home. No great nation. To make matters worse, the local people did not want them back. The site of the shattered city was not one that gave hope. It offered only despair and tears. Where was the salvation of God in that return home?

It would take a long time for salvation to come and hope to be fulfilled. However, this prophecy, and others like it, would be carried forward in the hearts of the people of God. They believed that God had not given up on his people. Why would he? God had saved them in the past and they firmly believed he would save them again in the future. Why would God lead his people to the promised land only for it to be taken away? That was their hope. That was their dream. How would it happen? God's messenger, the Messiah would come, and usher in God's new kingdom. They firmly believed that God would bless them with great abundance. As a Jew, living in 1st century Palestine, at the time of Christ, that is what you would have believed.

We are in the position to know how this prophecy is being fulfilled. It is not actually finished, yes, the kingdom of God is here, ushered in by Christ, but there is still the promise of a new Jerusalem to come. We are the "in-betweeners".

These are words that move through time and space. We cannot pin them down and say, this is what they mean. Prophecy crosses the barriers of time. Prophecy is not about history, it is about God. So we can apply these words of prophecy to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the bringer of Good News to the lame and the blind, the good shepherd who seeks and saves the lost, and we can say; salvation has come. A new nation of the spirit of God, has indeed been born.

The story of prophecy cannot and will not end in our time. The future is going to grab hold of these words and be relevant to a new context, unknown to us. The words will live on. Eternally transforming the 'now' into the 'then'. In that sense, prophecy has no beginning, and no end. It is both memory of the past and hope for the future. What better way to begin the new year. Amen.