

The Message of the Prophets (SERIES)

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Part 1: Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1-8)

For the first 30 years or so of my life there was a huge section of the Bible I never looked at. I never even opened this bit of the Bible and I never heard anybody refer to it. It was literally a closed book to me. Which is strange because it's a huge part of the Bible, and it's one of the most interesting parts of the Bible. It's the last 17 books of the Old Testament, each one of them named after a person. And these are the books of the Prophets.

Today we're starting a brand new series on the Prophets of the Old Testament. This week we've got an introduction to the theme and quick look at one of the prophets: Isaiah. And then for the next few weeks we'll be taking one prophet a week, looking at the message this prophet wanted people to hear.

So the most obvious question first: what is a prophet anyway? The first time we come across prophets in the Bible, they're characters in the OT history books (1 and 2 Kings). They're called Elijah and Elisha. But most of the prophets aren't in the history books. They have their own books, named after them (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos etc). And the books that have their names are not so much the story of their lives, they're a record of the messages they gave to the people of their day. And, roughly, the books of the prophets are arranged in terms of size, starting with the biggest.

We normally think of prophets as people who foretell the future. Sometimes they did that, but more often they have a warning for the people of their day: what will happen if they keep disobeying God and turning away from him. So they were messengers from God. They were usually controversial figures, who were attacked and persecuted because the messages they brought were unpopular. They didn't say what people wanted to hear.

Isaiah is the biggest of the books of the prophets (66 chapters!), and Isaiah is often thought to be the greatest of the prophets. We don't know a huge amount about Isaiah, but we do know he was married with two sons, and he lived in Jerusalem. Here's a bit more background for you.

Around 1,000 BC was the era of the kings David and Solomon. After their time, the kingdom split into two: Israel (north) - whose capital city was Samaria; and Judah (south) - whose capital city was Jerusalem. Isaiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. He was prophesying around the year 700BC. And his main theme is warnings about what will happen if the people don't turn back to God, and don't stop oppressing the poor. They'll be taken off into exile away from their own country (which is historically exactly what happened: they were carted off into exile in Babylon, and that's an event which dominates the psychology of so much of the OT).

The message of most of the book is this: the city of Jerusalem has become wealthy, but the rich are oppressing the poor. The other problem is that the people are following false gods. And here in Isaiah you find the two themes that dominate all the writings of the prophets. An attack on the oppression of the poor, and people chasing false gods. In other words: injustice and idolatry. It's a hard-hitting challenge to the people about what their priorities are and how they're living their lives. And a warning that if things don't change, there's a crisis around the corner.

One of the things that's interesting about the Prophets is the way they speak and write. It's extraordinary poetry, very powerful. Lots of repetition, personification (the desert rejoices, trees clap their hands, and so on). Incidentally, the prophets had a big influence on later poets, and songwriters like Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. If you listen to an early Dylan song like The Times They are a-Changing, and then read passages from Isaiah or one of the other prophets, you'll see exactly where the style comes from. A kind of poetic protest about the direction society's going in.

We tend to imagine the prophets as old men with grey beards. Most of them are actually young men, full of energy and anger. So you can see Isaiah as a protest singer, or poet, who raises uncomfortable issues for the people who listen to him. But the key thing with Isaiah and the other prophets is this. They're speaking not just on their own behalf, they're speaking on behalf of God himself. They're reflecting how God feels about the way people are living. And there's a warning: about the prospect of exile in Babylon.

But about two-thirds of the way through the Book of Isaiah, from chapter 40 onwards, the mood changes, the setting changes. It's now 150 years later. The exile's happened, and most of the nation is now living in Babylon. And now the message from Isaiah is a message for the exiles from Judah living in captivity, a message of hope and comfort (and that's part of what we read this morning). The message is this: God hasn't forgotten them and he will restore them to their land.

Now, obviously, these two episodes are a long way apart. First Jerusalem, then Babylon 150 years later. And that raises an obvious question: were both prophecies written by the same person? Well, some people say the man who wrote about Babylon may have been a later prophet, reapplying the message and style of Isaiah in a new setting. In other words, there was more than one Isaiah. The traditional view's always been that God gave some of the prophets a unique insight into the future, so the original Isaiah had a vision of what was going to happen in the future. And then God inspired him with a message of hope for these exiles who'd given up hope of ever returning home again.

Either way, I don't think it matters very much. What matters is the content of the prophecy, the message. Some people talk about Isaiah having two main parts: the book of Judgement and the book of Comfort.

So each of these parts of Isaiah had its original historic setting: first in Jerusalem, then in Babylon. But one of the fascinating things about Isaiah is this. Its message isn't limited only to those two settings. It continues down the ages to have resonances.

The Book of Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than any other book of the OT, by Jesus and Paul and the other NT characters. And it's extraordinary to read Isaiah in the light of the life of Jesus (eg Isaiah 9:6-7; 53:1-7). So much of the life of Jesus is a point-by-point fulfilment of passages in Isaiah, writing hundreds of years earlier. Also see Isaiah 61: 1-2. Jesus quotes this as his 'manifesto'.

But here's the important thing for us. The protest-songs of Isaiah don't only speak to ancient Jerusalem or Babylon. They don't only speak to the time of Jesus. They continue to resonate today. Why? Because Isaiah claims not just to be offering his own personal opinions on the world he sees. He claims to be speaking the very thoughts of God himself. Giving God's perspective on human societies. And that's what sets the prophets apart from protest singers like a Woody Guthrie or a Billy Bragg.

The writings of the prophets give us a unique and powerful insight into how God feels about the world, and how we live our lives. Here's the extraordinary insight: it actually matters to God how we live. And as we read God's priorities off the pages of Isaiah, what we find is this. God cares deeply about issues of justice and compassion in our world. When people exploit or bully others, when people cheat, when economic systems exploit the poorest people in the poorest countries, when retailers squeeze their suppliers and force them out of business by not paying them a fair price for what they produce: God gets angry.

The other big priority that we find in the pages of Isaiah is faith. There's a lot in the protest songs of Isaiah about people who forget about God. And people who chase God-substitutes, things they think will bring them happiness and fulfilment. But ultimately leave them feeling as empty as before.

We live in a society where everything seems to have become relative. The faith that people once had seems to be up for grabs. The values people live by seem to be fluid and shifting. But as we hear these powerful protest songs of Isaiah, things become clearer. We're not left to our own devices. Some things are still right, and some things are still wrong. Some things are true and some things are false.

Sometimes people use the word 'postmodern' to describe our society today. And 'postmodern' basically means that all the old systems and beliefs of the past have died. Everything is relative. What's true for you may not be true for me. It all depends on your perspective. All I can know is what works for me. The message from Isaiah is this: whatever the opinion-shapers of our day might say: from God's perspective, some things are right, and some things are wrong. Some things are true and some things are false.

And here's the challenge at the heart of Isaiah: put your trust in God. And let that faith overflow into the way you live: prioritise relationships with people and prioritise justice. It's about faith and it's about lifestyle. Get those two things right, and the rest of life will fall into place.

Part 2: Hosea (Hosea 11:1-7)

I'm going to tell you the plot of a story, and you've got to guess where it comes from. A man meets a vivacious girl, he falls head over heels for her, and after a while they get married.

For a while they seem happy but soon he discovers a dark secret that she's been hiding from him all along. She's been seeing other men. Even while the two of them were going out she'd been seeing other guys and he knew nothing at all about it. For years, they have a strange on-off relationship. And during that time they have three children. But there's always the suspicion at the back of the man's mind that some, maybe all, of the children aren't actually his. Eventually, she moves out and starts to live as a prostitute.

Now the man has the agony of not only knowing his wife and the mother of his children is going off with other men, he's also got the shame of everybody seeing her publicly soliciting. She's even got a pimp, who keeps an eye on her and takes half her earnings. So what does the man do? Everything in him wants to forget her and put all the heartache behind him. But instead, he decides to go and pay the pimp enough money to buy back his own wife.

He brings her home to him and the kids again. And he sets himself a challenge: despite his pain and humiliation, he's going to treat her well – with so much love that she never wants to go off with another man again. It's a risky option, given her track record. But that's what he does.

It's a story of sex, heartache and intrigue. It sounds like a racy airport novel, or a storyline from Eastenders. Actually it's from the Bible. It's the storyline of an Old Testament (OT) book called Hosea. The book of Hosea is based on the life story of a man, the prophet Hosea. He's the one who marries an unfaithful girl, called Gomer.

So what do we know about Hosea himself? He lived about 800 years before Christ, more or less around the same time as Isaiah, who we looked at last week. At that time, what we call the Holy Land was divided into two separate kingdoms. The northern part was called Israel, and the southern part was called Judah. Most of the prophets come from the southern kingdom of Judah, but Hosea's one of the few who comes from the north.

He lives at a turbulent time in history: the final days of the northern kingdom, just before it's overrun by invaders. It's a time of political turmoil, intrigue and assassinations. The kingdom's had no less than six kings in a 25-year period. Four of them were murdered in office, and then replaced by the people who bumped them off. So it's a hairy time to be alive, even without your wife becoming a prostitute.

One thing that's rather strange about the book of Hosea is that we're told that God actually told Hosea to marry Gomer, knowing she'd be unfaithful. And then it's God who tells Hosea to go and find her again and bring her home, and to keep on loving her, despite everything she's done.

So why does God call Hosea to do something as strange and heartbreaking as that? It seems cruel to put somebody through that sort of agony. But there's a reason. As you read the story of Hosea, you start to put yourself in his shoes. You start to empathise with this man. You feel his sense of pain and betrayal. And the sheer frustration of loving somebody with all your heart, unreservedly, while she throws it back in your face.

Then, while you're feeling the tragedy and frustration of it all, there's a twist. And we find out what this tragic love story is really about. Hosea's marriage represents the relationship between God and his people. God loves his people with complete and utter devotion. So he makes a covenant with them, or a binding agreement, that he'll be their God and they'll be his people.

But the people are unfaithful. Despite the love God has for them, and despite all he's done for them, they start running after other gods. Now at the time, that would have meant the gods of the Canaanites, who were their neighbours. And Canaanite religion included a male god called Baal and a female one called Asherah, and it was a religion centred on fertility. People would even sacrifice their own children as offerings to Baal and Asherah. So their neighbours had a religion that dignified promiscuity and infanticide. You did these things as part of your religious devotions, which is kind of interesting! But God says to his people: don't go there, it'll end up destroying you.

So that's the background to the ministry of Hosea. God tells Hosea to experience for himself the pain of loving somebody so much, who then turns their back on you. The heartache of loving somebody who's unfaithful to you. And God says, 'See, now you know what it feels like'.

For some of us, that way of thinking about God might be rather strange. If all the people in our country wrote down the words they associated with God, most of them would probably come up with words like: 'Almighty, King, eternal, sovereign, Spirit,' Things like that. But the devastating insight in the message of Hosea is that the word which best describes God is 'lover'. God's not just a great lawgiver or judge, stern and cold. According to Hosea, a better comparison is with a passionate young person, who's hot-headed and in love. Or a young parent who's overwhelmed with love for his children. That's what our reading this morning is about: images of God's parental love for his people.

Sometimes people say the difference between the OT and the NT is that in the NT God's a God of love, but back in OT times, he's a God of law or judgement. But then you come across Hosea. And it puts a huge spanner in the works. The most profound meditation on the love of God is actually in the OT.

The Book of Hosea tells us a lot about the character of God. That when his people go off and abandon him, he doesn't give up on them. It's what the NT calls Grace, the love of God which just keeps on giving, despite our rejection of it. If God wrote a pop song, it would be called something like, 'Never gonna give you up'.

So what's the message of the book of Hosea? It's a cry from the heart of God for his people to return to him, to stop chasing their God-substitutes and following their wayward appetites, and return to him. To Israel in 8th century BC, that meant a plea to turn away from Canaanite religion, with its promiscuity and violence, and return to faithfulness to the one true God, and live his way.

What might it mean for us today? It might also mean identifying our own god-substitutes, whatever they might be. It might mean turning our backs on patterns of behaviour we know aren't right in God's eyes. Saying sorry, and rethinking our attitudes to those things that promise excitement, but end up leaving us more empty and restless than when we started.

But most of all, it'll mean rethinking our image of God. We need to learn from what Hosea discovered about God. We need to see God not as a cold judge but as a passionate friend and lover, who'd give anything to bring us home again to him. We need to learn to see the Christian life not as a duty or a chore, or even as a kind of spirituality, but as a whirlwind romance. And we need to learn to see our own daily walk with God not as a dull routine, but as a passionate and committed relationship.

The message of Hosea is that *that's* the kind of God we worship, and that's the kind of lifestyle God calls us to. To settle for anything less than that is to settle for second-best.

Part 3: Jonah (Jonah 2:1-6)

Our current series of talks is on a bit of the Old Testament (OT) that most people don't read very much: the prophets. And today we're looking at the prophet Jonah, as in Jonah and the whale. But in lots of ways, Jonah's very different from the other prophetic books around it. Most of the books of the prophets are collections of sayings or oracles. But the actual message of Jonah only takes up one verse! It's not an oracle, but a story with a lesson for us. And we'll explore in a moment what that message is.

Also, most of the prophets are heroes, because they speak God's word, but Jonah's presented in a very poor light. Not only is he no hero, he actually tries to get out of doing what God calls him to do. And that's different from most of the prophets. The tone's also different from most books of prophecy. Normally they're deadly serious, but the tone of Jonah is satirical. It's making fun of the prophet.

We often think of prophets as great messengers from God with a powerful message. Not Jonah. When God calls him to go to the city of Nineveh with a message for the people, Jonah behaves like a sulky child. He says, 'No, won't!' and goes in the opposite direction: towards Spain. And it's while he's on a boat going in the wrong direction that God sends a storm and he ends up in the water, and gets swallowed by a big fish. So Jonah's not held up as somebody to copy. He's held up as an example of what we shouldn't do. He's a man who says no to God, because he doesn't like the idea of talking to people about God's message.

And there's another reason why the book of Jonah is unusual. Normally, if OT prophets denounce foreign nations, they do it from their home land, and the message is for the benefit of their home audience, the people of Israel. But Jonah is called to go to Nineveh with God's message. He's to preach not to God's chosen people, but to a pagan nation.

And that means that the central theme of the book is an interesting one: God's attitude to pagan people. In other words, people who don't have faith in him. Now, the main thing most people think about when they think about Jonah is the whale. But the whale episode takes up only three verses out of 48! One writer said 'People have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God!' The theme is God's greatness - that he's the creator of the whole world, the land and sea and of all peoples - and everything in the book points to that.

We already know that the OT's the story of a nation, Israel. God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and that he gives them laws to help them live as his people, and he frees them from slavery in Egypt.

But that raises the question: what about everybody else? Is God not interested in the rest of the world? Well, what we've said about Israel's true. But it's only part of the picture. The OT begins not with Abraham but with Adam. Not with covenant (with Israel) but creation (of everyone). It tells us that God's not just a tribal God of Israel, but Lord of the universe, and he's interested in all peoples. And even the covenant with Abraham is not only narrowly for Jews (see Genesis 12:1-4 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you').

God not only blessed Abraham, but made him a blessing to all the nations. God's purpose is not just for Israel but for the whole world. That comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Christ we see the Kingdom of God opened finally and decisively for all the nations. But during the OT time, the idea is that Israel should be a herald of God's salvation to the other nations.

And the tragedy is that Israel keeps on forgetting that God's promise is to bless all nations. They become obsessed with their own history and their own status. They see themselves as God's favourites and immune from God's judgement. So the story of Jonah is a reminder that God's interested in all nations.

Remember Jesus's story of the prodigal son. In that story the older son isn't happy that the wayward younger son's come home, so he just stands and sulks. The same message is there in Jonah. It's a similar parable being acted out. Jonah represents the people in Israel who want to keep the message all to themselves and not take the message into the secular or pagan city. And the message from God is this: my message must go to all people, right in the heart of those cities.

And how do the people respond? The Book of Jonah tells us something extraordinary. That the pagans are more ready to respond than the prophet himself is.

So what do we know about the city of Nineveh where Jonah was called to go? It's described in the book as the 'great' or 'vast' city of Nineveh. It has 120,000 people living there. It's about 500 miles northeast of Israel, and it's the main city of Assyria, which was the rising world power of the day. Within 50 years or so, Nineveh would become the capital of the vast Assyrian empire.

So why did God want to judge it? We don't get many details from the Book of Jonah itself, but we know from other OT sources that the people there were exploiting the poor, they were cruel, and involved in idol worship, prostitution and witchcraft. It's a big, pagan city, the centre of the biggest world empire of the day.

So what's challenge for us today, from the Book of Jonah? I believe the main challenge is a challenge to our understanding of God. Is God just in church, just interested in churchgoers? Or is he interested in everybody, even my neighbour who doesn't care about God, and may even be an atheist?

Jonah tells us that the second is true. God's interested in his whole creation, all people everywhere. And he longs for everybody to hear his message and turn to him. And like the people of Nineveh, people today are often more interested than we might expect. That's because God always goes before us, preparing people's hearts to be receptive.

It's been said that the church is the only institution set up for the benefit of non-members. A Swiss theologian called Emil Brunner said this: 'The church exists by mission, as fire exists by burning'. In other words, a church that only looks inwards and not outwards is a church that's died. The great commission from Jesus, his last words to his followers, were to go and make disciples of all nations. Again, it's all about mission.

And that says a lot to churches like ours. We need to keep mission at the heart of everything we do. We need to keep focussing at least as much on people outside the church as we do on people inside the church. We need to be active in drawing in new people, and offering hope and community to all kinds of people out there.

But the encouraging message from the Book of Jonah is that God's already been going ahead of us and preparing people's hearts. And so often that's what I find. When I talk to people about faith, I'm never starting from scratch. There's always been something happening in people's lives that it connects with.

Just recently I had a conversation at the gym with somebody I'd never met before. We got onto the subject of faith, and this person was really interested to talk more about it. And the same thing happened recently when I was on a train. I believe God had already been at work in those people's lives, and a conversation with me was just the latest step along the way.

But I believe that can be true for all of us. If we have those conversations about faith with work colleagues, or with friends and neighbours, I believe we'll be surprised to find how God's gone before us and prepared the ground in advance. I'm only going where God's already at work in somebody's life.

Part 4: Haggai (Haggai 2:6-9) © Rev Sonja Arnold

For the last few weeks you've been looking at some of the prophets from the Old Testament and Mike has asked me to share something with you about the prophet Haggai.

Our first problem with Haggai, though, is where to find him? His book is only two chapters long and almost impossible to find as you flick through the pages of the Old Testament!

Well, here's a clue on finding this little book. He falls between the books of Zechariah and Zephaniah - so look towards the end of the Old testament for the Z's and you'll find Haggai right in the middle of them.

It may be short but there's a lot in it and it is well worth finding.

The prophet gives four messages to the Ancient people of Israel- we'll look at just the first two.

Background

The year is 520 BC.

The dominant power in the world at that time is the great Persian Empire.

Before them it had been the Babylonians- a mighty power which nobody thought would fall - but in 539BC Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians, captured Babylon and the Persian Empire began.

This was good news for the people of God, the Ancient Israelites.

The Babylonians had been ruthless rulers; they not only conquered lands but also destroyed them and took their people captive. Jerusalem itself had been attacked, conquered and destroyed, with most of its people taken into captivity.

Cyrus was more benevolent; he allowed the captive people to go home and to rebuild the lands. Many Jews took this opportunity and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, excitement and anticipation.

On arriving though, they are faced with the enormity of the task ahead of them. The city is in ruins, there is nowhere to live, there's no security, there's no place to worship. Everything has to be rebuilt- where on earth are they to start?

It is to this group of people that the prophet Haggai brings his four messages from the Lord. We are going to look at just the first two.

Message 1

Chapter 1 v. 2 "This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, "The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built" Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai " is it time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Well they had obviously decided what needed doing first. They needed houses - not only bog standard houses but panelled houses i.e. finely decorated houses. Perhaps the equivalent of not just using standard cheap paint but going for those finer delicate shades that cost a more money. They are doing this while the temple lies in ruins.

This is a people who have got their priorities wrong.

It's not a bad thing to do up your houses, but they were doing this first.

Now, to be fair, they hadn't just forgotten the temple. They had started to rebuild, the foundations had been laid but they had experienced opposition, they had got discouraged and obviously took that to mean that it wasn't time to do this yet. So they turned their attention to their own houses, their own lives. They had got distracted.

Well that's quite understandable.

And indeed life was hard in other ways.

The harvests had been bad, inflation was high, people never felt satisfied with what they had, they were always left wanting more. They were living in nice houses but they were running just to stand still.

Some of us know what that feels like!

Maybe we think that the Lord should give them a break, that he should be more understanding!

Instead God says something rather surprising... He says *"I'm the one making it tough for you"*, see Chapter 1 v9 *"You expected much but it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away"... I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle and the labour of your hands"*

Rather than being understanding – He says, *"I am the cause of your frustration"*

"Why" – "Because of my house which remains a ruin"

God not is not withholding from them because He's mean. He wants to bless them and indeed he does once the work on the temple gets started.

But it's really important that this job gets done.

Haggai's message is: Get your priorities right!

Message 2

Haggai is a very successful prophet because the people immediately respond. They agree with what God has said and get to work straight away.

The second message is given less than a month later. They've begun the work but they've not got too far. They've gathered in Jerusalem for a special religious festival and are faced with those ruins again. Not only that, but some of the older people remember the first temple, the one built by Solomon, the one renowned for its splendour - that certainly wasn't painted with cheap paint, it was inlaid with gold! They knew they could never rebuild it with such great splendour. And so, they were discouraged.

We are so easily discouraged. Maybe God has told us to do something we start but we look at our seemingly meagre resources or we look at the church down the road that seems to have everything and we just want to sit down and give up.

The Lord speaks again through the prophet Haggai. This time it's a word of encouragement. Chapter 2 v 4: *"Be strong all you people of the land... and work. For I am with you"*

God doesn't do things by magic in this world - He works through his people, through you and me; all of us have a part to play. We are called to work, but it will take courage in the face of opposition, frustrations, and lack of resources. But God's promise is always *"I am with you"*. This is no faint comfort, this is the promise of the presence of the Almighty, all-powerful Sovereign God.

Then he says something else. Having encouraged them to do their bit he now shows them what He is going to do.

Chapter 2 vv 6-9

"In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord Almighty. "The silver and the gold is mine," declares the Lord. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house... and in this place I will grant peace"

The Lord promises that this house they are building will be of greater splendour than the previous one. He is the one who can make this happen because all the treasures of the earth belong to him. The silver and gold may be in the hands of nations and rulers but it all belongs to God and he will move it from one place to another when and if He wills. He says here that He will do just that. He will move heaven and earth and shake up the nations, so that *"the desired of all nations"* (or a better translation would be *"the desirable things"*) - that is, the wealth and the treasures of the nations, will come.

How's that for motivation! God says: You do your part, but then wait and see what I will do.

This promise is partly fulfilled a little later when some of the neighbouring people who oppose the work are ordered to pay for the work out of their own treasuries. However, it is many years later that King Herod the Great expands this very temple and spends a fortune on it.

Interestingly, it is to Herod's magnificently refurbished temple that Jesus himself comes. These hard-pressed people facing the task of rebuilding a ruined city and temple could ever have guessed that over these very foundations would walk the Son of God himself. God is often doing a much bigger work than we could ever imagine.

God is always at work in his world. He always wants to do great things. He doesn't just do them by just waving a magic wand; He works with His people and through His people. It is our great privilege to be involved in that work. And if he calls us to do something, he promises to be with us, to provide all the strength and all the resources we need.

It starts though, with God's people putting God first.

Part 5: Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9-13)

Back in the year 155, a man from southern France published a book. The man was called Michel de Nostradame and his book was called *The Prophecies*. Normally the author's name is Latinised as Nostradamus, and his book has stayed in print ever since.

The reason it's become so famous is that people have claimed down the years that Nostradamus had the gift of looking into the future and predicting future events. You can still find lots of books that claim Nostradamus predicted events like the great Fire of London, Hitler and the Nazis, even the death of Diana and 9/11.

Lots of weird and wonderful stories circulate about Nostradamus's own life, like the story that when his body was dug up around the time of the French Revolution, he had a medallion round his neck with the exact date on it of the day he would be disinterred. In other words, he predicted that as well.

So was it all true? Well, most scholars today say no. They say all the weird and wonderful stories about his life were made up long after the event. And they point out that the so-called prophecies in his book are so vague and general that you could take almost any event in history and find one of his prophecies that sounds sort of similar! One thing's for sure: there isn't a single one of Nostradamus's prophecies that people saw as a prediction of a specific event before it happened. It's always people reading things back into Nostradamus after the event.

But it doesn't stop people writing creepy books about him and making cheesy films about him. It's the whole idea that a man can somehow see the future and predict events centuries after his own lifetime.

Today's the last in our series on the Old Testament prophets. And right at the start of the series we pointed out that the main role of the prophets in the Bible wasn't to look into the future. It was to speak a message from God to the people of their own day. And the main themes they spoke about were justice and lifestyle issues. Normally the messages were to their own people, but sometimes they were called to go to other peoples with a message, as in the case of Jonah.

Today, we're looking at the prophet Zechariah. So let me just give you a quick bit of background to Zechariah the man. He lived in Jerusalem at the same time as Haggai, who we looked at last week. In other words, around 500 BC - just after the people had returned from exile in Babylon. In fact, Zechariah himself was born in Babylon and was one of the people who returned home to Jerusalem.

The message of the book is a challenge to spiritual renewal. To remember God and build their lives around God. And he continues Haggai's theme of the need to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The first part of the book has some rather strange images in it: a gold lamp-stand and a flying scroll, a mysterious man with a measuring rod, a horseman standing near myrtle trees in a ravine. In fact, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse appear in Zechariah's vision, long before they appear in the book of Revelation.

It's all rather strange, surreal stuff. But the main thing you need to know about all these images is that they're symbolic. They represent things like judgement, the surrounding nations and the role of the Temple.

But then as you read on in the book of Zechariah, something interesting happens. All the surreal, symbolic images dry up. And instead what you get is some passages that jump out at you, because they seem to be extraordinary predictions of episodes in the life of a man who would live 500 years later.

Our reading in chapter 9: it's a prediction about a king riding into Jerusalem, but it's an odd sort of king. One who doesn't ride on a horse, but on a donkey. And what sort of king is he? One who brings 'salvation'. Then in chapter 12, the prophet talks about a king of the house of David, who will pour out a 'spirit of grace' on the people, but then he speaks about them looking on this King as one they have pierced, and mourning for him.

In fact, this is something you find time after time in the prophets. Predictions relating to the life of Jesus, hundreds of years later. Or at least, mysterious predictions that seem to make no sense in their own day, but make perfect sense when you see them alongside the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus.

Believe it or not, there are well over 300 places in the OT where you find these glimpses into the future, which match up with the life of Jesus. And more than half of these are in the writings of the Prophets. Now, the chances of finding one individual that all these messianic prophecies fit is absolutely tiny.

Of course sceptics would say: well, Jesus obviously knew the OT well. And he knew all these prophecies, so maybe he deliberately tried to fulfill as many of them as possible. But the thing is: so much of the time, the prophecies that were fulfilled were out of Jesus's hands. There was no way he could shape events to fit the prophecies. Things like:

- The messiah would come from the family of David, but also be born into a poor family.
- The messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- The messiah's body would be pierced, and he'd die a violent death.
- The messiah would be buried in a rich man's grave.

Lots of prophecies about a coming messiah which come true in the life of Jesus, even those things Jesus couldn't possibly control. And these prophecies are much more specific than anything you find in Nostradamus!

So in the writings of the prophets, you have this big focus on the world of their own day. The messages the prophets bring is a hard-hitting challenge to the way people were living and to the priorities they lived by. But here and there, especially in the prophets Zechariah and Isaiah, you have these extraordinary little windows into the future. Glimpses of somebody who'd come and bring hope and transformation.

Through most of Jewish history, what people expected was a military or political hero. A great king who'd throw out the invaders, rebuild the Temple, and rule the nation with peace. A great king long promised by God.

The extraordinary claim of the New Testament is this: God kept his word. The messiah came, fulfilling not only the prophecies of a great King coming, but also a whole lot of other prophecies the people had never even noticed before. All the hopes and dreams and aspirations of centuries of history come to a sharp focus in 1st century Palestine.

But when the messiah came, he also came redefining who the messiah was. So when Jesus came, most people didn't recognize him. Even his closest followers took a long time for the penny to drop. And in fact, for most of them the penny only really dropped after Jesus had died, and rose again from the dead three days later.

It's a bit like one of those films where there's a twist in the end, which then makes you want to go back to the start and watch the whole film again but see it in a new light. Films like *The Sixth Sense* or *The Village*. After Jesus rose from the dead, and people have proof that he really is alive, because they meet him face-to-face, they start to replay the whole video again in their minds. Jesus's words and his actions, over the past few years. The whole thing. And they suddenly start to make links they never made before.

They begin to see wider horizons than they ever believed possible. This wasn't just a brilliant teacher and healer. This was a man whose life was an acting out of hundreds of prophecies written by different people in different places, over hundreds of years. It begins to look as if there's some sort of plan or guiding hand behind the scenes of human history.

And that's what makes this thing so exciting and so contemporary for us too. The reason the church is still here, 2,500 years after Zechariah's day, is because we believe that person glimpsed by Zechariah actually came. He came fulfilling hundreds of other prophecies too. There's something unique and compelling about the prophecies of the OT, and the person they point to, which makes Nostradamus look amateurish in comparison.

But the big question for you and me today is what relevance this same Jesus has to our lives and lifestyles in the 21st century. And the reason the church still exists today is to help the people of our generation answer that question for themselves.