

# Listening to the singers of the song of the Kingdom

**Stephen Ibbotson**

The glacial valley was deep and wide. The panorama from an elevated position, looking along the valley, was like a scene from Lord of the Rings. People in groups and clusters moved along the valley towards what were, unseen by them, early coloured veins of dawn. Some groups moved purposefully and in unison, while others were caught up in human eddies and backwaters which hindered their progress. Either side, steep hills and mountains climbed towards the darkened sky. On outcrops and promontories stood lonely figures, faces turned towards the breaking dawn, singing a delicate song that permeated the valley. I asked, 'Who are these Lord?' 'They are the prophets. They have learnt to sing the song of the Kingdom.' 'Why do some struggle along the valley, while others make decisive progress?' 'There are those that have learnt to listen to the song of the Kingdom. They recognise its cadence, phrasing and rhythm. It has become the song of their hearts. Others are busy and do their best, but the song of the Kingdom does not form their walk or ways.'

Prophets are those with a spiritual gift of transcendence. They position themselves at some distance from the fast fury of life. They are often alone. But they see with clarity things of which the rest of us are unaware. They have learnt to see into the distance of hope. Their lives are rhythmically ordered by the beautiful cadences of God's Kingdom. Down in the valley we value the workers and especially the organisers of the workers, those that lead, plan and strategise. They are often people of great ideas and clear vision. But the best among them are those that have learnt to listen to the singers of the song of the Kingdom.

'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' Christian living is about learning to spot the Kingdom as it comes towards us and realign ourselves accordingly. If we pray that prayer with meaning, we become increasingly alert and conscious of the movements of God's Spirit of life, and sensitive to dynamics that lead to stagnation or death. Prophets are those who, as God's gift to the Church, are able to prepare us to see the future of God's Kingdom as it comes towards us. Apostles are those who lead us towards that future, stepping out with courage to say 'Come with me.' This is why the church is built on the apostles and prophets. We need to be prepared to receive the future that is forever coming towards us.

We are a busy and active people. We want to do things well and to be about God's mission. God takes pleasure in this. But he takes even greater pleasure in a people that are about the Father's business whilst guided by the rhythms and cadences of Kingdom hope. We live in a time conscious of the need for good management, of careful considered process. But however good our management systems are, the Church is more than an organisation of productivity, a system to be managed or change-process to be negotiated. It is the people learning to be responsive to the Spirit of life. And to become responsive we need transcendence, the ability to rise above our human anxiety and even merely our determination to do good. We need the song of the new dawn to wash over our ears and capture our hearts, changing our badly co-ordinated movements into the rhythm of God's Kingdom dance. The challenge of Peter's use of Joel's vision remains: that the whole community is permeated with the prophetic, pervading all human categories of age, class and gender.

This vision came when I was reflecting on what it means to become a healthier and better-formed community and disciple. Its impact underlined how much we need to give a place to people called to listen to God's voice. They are overlooked in our culture of anxious activism, marginalised because they don't always come with loud voices, dynamic ministries, and front what they say with 'Thus says the Lord.' For them, to seek God's voice in the wilderness is more important than engaging in the busyness of human life. Like Moses they have learnt to turn aside from the ordinary things of this life, and attend to the strange approach of God. We need more prophets. We certainly need to listen to their song more attentively.