



Spurned fiery witnesses – Fr Charlò Camilleri, O.Carm.

Prophets and prophetic voices always remain unheeded

Community

Religion

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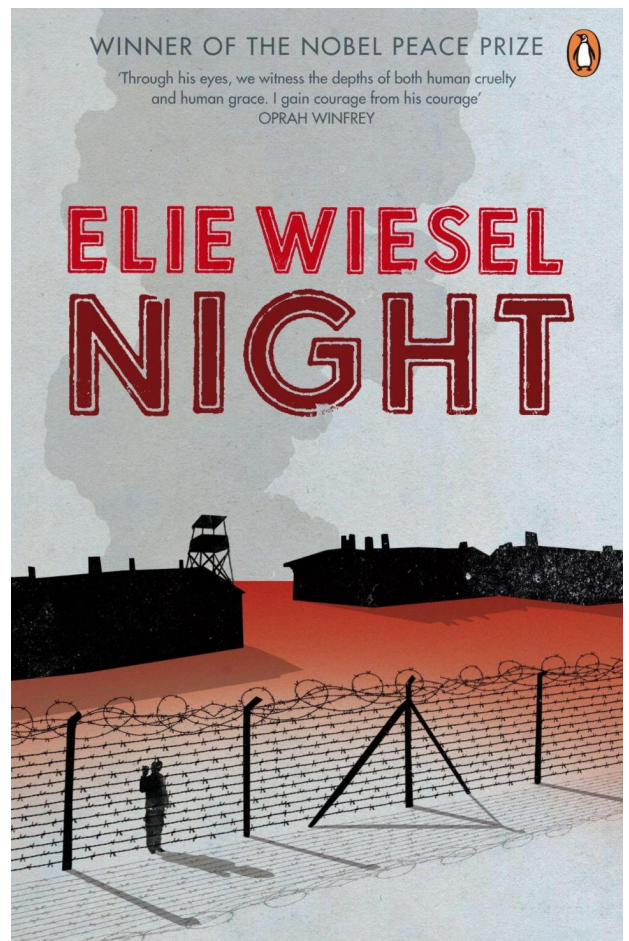
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Detail of the fresco depicting the Prophet Jeremiah by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. Photo: Commons.wikimedia.org

20th Sunday in ordinary time. Today's readings: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Psalm 40:2, 3, 4, 18; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

Elie Weisel's memoir *Night*, recognised as a bedrock in the genre of Holocaust writings, tell us of Moshe, a fugitive from the brutal slaughter of Jews by the Gestapo. Ignited with a sense of mission, he returns to the village of Sighet, running from house to house to warn the Jews of the impending danger that will soon befall them. In a somewhat Cassandra predicament, notwithstanding being heard and noticed, he is disregarded by his own people. The rest is history.

Weisel is renowned for his writings and talks on prophets, reserving a place of honour for the Prophet Jeremiah: "Some prophets speak to our mind, others to our heart, still others to our imagination and/or memory. Jeremiah combines all three. [...] He is the only one who had foreseen the catastrophe, lived the catastrophe, and



Elie Weisel's memoir *Night*.

remembered the catastrophe and written about it.” In today’s first reading, Jeremiah is accused of “demoralising” the military and the people. He was found guilty before the king of not speaking out of interest “in the welfare of our people, but in their ruin”. In a similar fashion Elijah was accused by King Ahab as being a “troubler of Israel”. Jeremiah was found guilty and thrown into an underground cistern prison, so as not to be heard and possibly to be left there starving to death. Fortunately, he was rescued in time by Ebed-Melech.

History has repeatedly shown us that unfortunately this is the endless fate of prophets. Up to our own times, political powers always do their utmost to disregard, silence – sometimes even resolving to murder – prophets who arise in the name of justice and truth, speaking their mind and voicing warnings to unconcerned people blinded by indifference. Prophets and prophetic voices always remain unheeded, often treated as enemies of the people, and accused of causing trouble and division and disrupting national or world peace and harmony.

But peace is not merely the absence of conflict, or the suppression of any critical voice courageously daring to speak truth to power. Peace arises only where truth and justice abound. Divisive prophetic voices tear off the illusion that everything is going on well with us and with society at large. Rather, they point out bluntly and vociferously to the structures of sin that threaten the common good and the harmonious coexistence of people. Jesus himself in today’s gospel declares powerfully: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” This division, Jesus forewarns us today, takes place also in the network of our family ties and amid our significant relationships as these have to be set aside, if necessary, when it comes to witnessing truth and justice.

In his first message for the World Day of Peace, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, warned against “aberrant ideological and political systems” that wilfully twist truth. He rightly points out that in a post-truth society we cannot fail “to be seriously concerned about lies in our own time, lies which are the framework for menacing scenarios of death”. Speaking truth to power is decisive for a bright future. We all witness the devastating effects of present conflicts between nations, originating in untruth and lies. Also, as a nation, we have our own shameful stories of structural abuse and injustices committed impunitively for the advantage of the few, creating a web of grievances and wrongs.

Weisel’s advice is very appropriate to a complacent society and a weakened Church: “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”

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