

WALTER MOBERLY

# To Speak for God: The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah

**Preaching the Old Testament has become a rarity. Preachers are put off by the narrative structure of so much of it, and by the theological difficulties it presents in the portrayal of God. Walter Moberly invites us to rediscover the preacher's vocation through a re-reading of 1 Kings 22: Micaiah the prophet combines a penetrating grasp of the politics and diplomacy of his day with insight into the knowledge of God's will and God's ways. The result is electrifying preaching that speaks still.**

The task of the preacher is to speak on God's behalf. The preacher is so to speak to people's hearts and minds that they may recognize themselves as faced with the truth and love of the living God, and may change in the way they think and live, so that they may become more like the God who has met with them (and thereby also become more fully and truly human). Scripture (rightly understood!) gives the preacher access to the mind and will of God, and so constitutes the content of that which the preacher must, in one way or other, speak.

This essay will not directly address questions of theory and principle. Rather I wish to exemplify the conviction that theory and practice are inseparable and that theories of hermeneutics and homiletics are only truly understood when the biblical text comes alive. Instead of discussing 'how to do it', I want to 'do it'.

Having said that, I start with three related statements of principle which are basic to what follows. First, *the world of the Bible is our world*. Whatever the cultural differences between then and now, Christian faith necessarily affirms that: a) human beings now are the same creatures as then, with the same basic existential realities of life and death and choices of right and wrong; b) the God of whom the Bible speaks is the one God, to whom humanity relates no less now than then.

Secondly, *we must read the biblical story with total imaginative seriousness*. If we will not read and preach the Bible with at least the same degree of imaginative engagement which we accord to our favourite novels or soaps, no account of biblical authority or reliability is likely to be much more than a form of words.

Thirdly, *biblical stories deal with basic issues of life*. Too often we simply fail to see what the story is about. We need to relearn the discipline of recognizing how in the biblical text the enduring issues of life and death are constantly raised and probed in ways both deep and searching, and how this also makes the positive transformation of life a possibility.

I will look at just one narrative in detail: 1 Kings 22:1-38, Micaiah ben Imlah at the court of Ahab. I choose it for four reasons. First, the general demise within Anglican worship of the serious reading of, and preaching from, the OT is a mark of profound spiritual impoverishment. Secondly, the story of Micaiah offers a prime example of the kind of problematic portrayal of God – what kind of God is it that encourages lying in order to get someone killed? – that turns the OT into an embarrassing difficulty to explain away instead of a well to drink from. Thirdly, the story depicts the kind of encounter which in principle characterizes the situation of the preacher: an ‘I – Thou’ encounter in which the truth of God and of human life is at stake. Fourthly, the story explores the dynamics of response, and, in particular, the *failure* of response (that is, of positive response) which the one who speaks for God may encounter. It probes an issue close to the heart of any true preacher.

### Exposition of 1 Kings 22:1-38 (NIV)

*Read vv 1-3:* The issue for going to war is the perennial problem of disputed border territory. Although Ramoth Gilead was part of Israel under Solomon (1 Kings 4:13), the text does not say whether or not the king's claim to the territory was a good one. The peace between Aram and Israel, however, had only been short, and the king is willing to sacrifice peace for the arguable benefit of regaining disputed territory (arguable, because no benefit is specified for anyone – except, implicitly, the king in his reputation and power). His course is not obviously ‘sinful’, if by that is meant transgression of a commandment. Yet the king implicitly abuses royal prerogative and responsibility for his people in lightly sacrificing peace and undertaking war.

The fact that the king lets what he has in mind be known publicly in his court (v 3) implies that his mind is already resolved. His question is not a genuine question (as it is, at least (in form, in v.6) but a leading question. Since people don't like changing publicly adopted positions (for there is always fear of loss of face amidst cries of ‘climbing down’, ‘U-turns’), they don't start asking for support for a position unless the decision is already taken. That the king knows what he wants to do, and is resolved to do it, is basic to the dynamic of the story.

*Read vv 4-6:* Jehoshaphat diplomatically consents to the king's request. But, being pious as well as diplomatic, he requests that proper religious practice be observed, and that God's will be sought before the king's apparent decision is finalized. The king consents, but he only wants confirmation of what he has already decided. The prophets, religious professionals, functionaries whose livelihood depends on the king, know which way the wind is blowing and what the king wants so they duly oblige by telling the king what he wants to hear. They are the classic careerists of any administration, whose prime concern becomes the maintenance of their position within the system by pleasing the boss.

It is easy, however, to criticize the prophets from a safe distance. It looks less easy in situations where our livelihood (income, home, future) depends on **not falling**

out with people in power. When does one trim, and go with the flow? When does one stand firm and risk all on a point of principle? We can never know in advance, and be spared the responsibility of making hard decisions. These prophets at court may be going astray. But those who are sitting comfortably are in no position to cast the first stone.

*Read vv 7-8:* The correctness of the assumption that the prophets are telling the king what he wants to hear is confirmed by Jehoshaphat's response. He smells a rat. We are not told how. Maybe it is simply as obvious to Jehoshaphat as to the four hundred which way the royal wind is blowing, and he wants his request for the seeking of God's will to be taken more seriously.

Seeking God's will – the question of how one discerns what God is saying and doing – is basic to life; and it is rarely straightforward. In particular, how is one to choose between accredited religious leaders, who all claim to speak for God, when they disagree? The issue is not as simple as just distinguishing the one who speaks for the Lord from those who speak for someone else such as Baal (though the NIV of v 7, following the LXX and omitting one word in the Hebrew, mistakenly implies this). The problem of the text is the much harder one – when people indeed speak in the name of the one true God, and yet there is reason to doubt what they say. Truth in relation to God may in no way be resolved by the proper formal allegiance and correct language of people.

The king knows of another prophet, Micaiah, but he is unwelcome for a simple reason. That is, Micaiah is known by the king as someone who does not tell the king what he wants to hear, but rather what he doesn't want to hear. The sense here of 'bad' (Heb. *ra*) is simply 'unpleasant', 'unwelcome'. Micaiah says things which the king finds unacceptable.

However, as Jehoshaphat diplomatically puts it, the fact that the king does not like Micaiah does not mean that Micaiah may not have something to say which needs to be heard. Jehoshaphat still wants a second opinion, and if Micaiah is the only other prophet around then he must be heard; to which the king agrees.

*Read vv 9-12:* As Micaiah is summoned, the narrator pauses to fill out the context in which all this is happening. An impressive scene it is – the kings of Israel and Judah, the two anointed rulers of the (divided) people of God, wearing the clothes (robes) and sitting in the special chairs (thrones) which represent and symbolize the dignity and authority of their position. And they are at the gate of the city, the formal gathering place where those with public responsibility administered justice (cf. Ruth 4:1-12, Job 29:7-17). In the presence of these kings, the prophets, the formally recognized representatives of their religion, are performing their religious function of speaking on God's behalf to the leaders of God's people. Zedekiah, presumably the leader of the prophets, performs a symbolic action such as Hebrew prophets characteristically performed (e.g. Jer. 13:1-11, 19:1-15), while the rest prophesy similarly, like a chorus or group supporting their lead singer. The temporal and spiritual authorities of God's people are gathered together in their official capacity in the place of justice. Here surely one can expect God to be present and his will to be done.

Why does the narrator take the trouble thus to depict the setting? It is not, I think, that he likes grand occasions (of a sort still to be found today, *mutatis mutandis*, in Westminster, Washington, or the Kremlin). There are, I suggest, at least three reasons in terms of his story. First, we are invited to contemplate the possibility that such a formal and symbolically resonant gathering of religiously responsible leaders may in fact be a sham, an elaborate fraud. Secondly, related to this, the scene of the earthly court prepares for Micaiah's vision of a heavenly court (vv 19-23), at which the true nature of the earthly court will be revealed. Thirdly, we are given to know exactly what Micaiah has to face. Although the Hebrew idiom of v 10 makes clear that this is the existing context, and not a new one set up specially for Micaiah's benefit, we now see that Micaiah must face not a private meeting with a hostile king but a meeting in a formal, public context whose every dimension will bring pressure on Micaiah to conform to the will of that king.

*Read vv 13-14:* We are not told of special instructions from the king to the messenger, but that is at least in part because he needs such instructions no more than do the four hundred prophets. He lives and works at court, and he knows what is going on. So he already starts to bring pressure to bear on Micaiah. Micaiah must tell the king what all the other prophets are telling him and confirm the king's known wish to make war on Aram for the sake of a border town. He must tell the king what he wants to hear, something that will sound 'good' to him (NIV 'success' and 'favourably', v 13, both represent the Hebrew *tov*, 'good', that which the king complained he never got from Micaiah, v 8). Micaiah, not surprisingly (given what the king has already said about him) refuses to do any such thing, but rather formulates his responsibility to speak for God in its true form. By his invocation of the Lord, Micaiah makes clear that it is to the Lord that he is accountable.

*Read vv 15-16:* What a surprise! Micaiah says what the other prophets say, when we expected him to say something different. But the surprise is shortlived, for the king's indignant response shows what is happening. Micaiah, as we shall see, is a skilled and daring communicator who fully understands the dynamics of the situation. If what the kings wants is a message of 'good', of success, then that is what Micaiah, his loyal subject, will give him. Micaiah repeats verbatim the words of the other prophets (v 12b). But as he does so, he mimics them so sarcastically that the king instantly gets the point – he, the king, is being mocked by Micaiah. This provokes from the king a protestation of delicious irony. The man who hitherto has wanted nothing but confirmation of his own will now claims the moral high ground and says that he wants nothing less than the truth of God.

In provoking the king thus, Micaiah has achieved two things. First he has thrown the king off guard by his unexpected mockery, and has at least got him to express how important it is that Micaiah truly speak the words of the Lord to him. Such an expostulation is, of course, no guarantee that that is what he really wants but it at least might lead to a greater openness. Secondly, the king's recognition that the promise of victory on Micaiah's lips is empty words, mere mockery of himself, opens the possibility that the king himself, in his heart of hearts, suspects that his prophets are toadies whose word is not to be relied upon. But can Micaiah make the king truly face up to what he already knows?

*Read vv 17-18:* Micaiah's message from the Lord takes the form of a vision, a vision of the future and its interpretation by the Lord. The king instantly understands it – or at least thinks he understands it – and pronounces accordingly. His prejudices about Micaiah have been confirmed: he just makes unpleasant threats against the king.

But has the king understood the vision? Only in part. He has seen, rightly, that it is a vision which implies his death in battle. What he has not seen is that it is not primarily a vision about him at all. It is a vision about Israel, the people for whom he has responsibility; they are scattered and leaderless. The Lord's concern is for them and their safe return home. But the king, selfishly, is concerned only with the implications for himself. Micaiah's words, in essence a challenge to the king to remember his responsibilities as shepherd to his people before it is too late, evoke no response. Or rather, they evoke the wrong response.

Here it is vital to remember the basic dynamics of Hebrew prophecy. Prophecy is relational, engaging language that seeks a response. Classically, it is a warning of disaster which seeks a response of fundamental change of heart: the disaster may be averted because the Lord himself responds to such response (he may 'repent'), i.e. he responds genuinely to the human who turns to him. This responsive dynamic of prophecy is set out as a basic axiom in key prophetic texts such as Jer. 18:1-12 (esp. 7-10) or Ezek. 33:1-20 (esp. 7-9,11) and is exemplified perhaps most famously in the story of Jonah (Jonah 3:1-10). It is somewhat like saying to someone who is standing carelessly in the road, 'There's a car coming – you'll be run over', where the whole object of speaking is to get the person to move. If the person moves, the words fulfil their purpose. If the person does not move, and if they are in fact run over, there is no satisfaction in the literal fulfilment and correctness of the warning; there is only the knowledge that the person who gave the warning is not at fault for having failed to do so.

This means that Micaiah's vision of Israel's distress and their loss of a leader is a warning designed to avert its taking place. It is a challenge to the king to repent, i.e. to abandon his self-willed ambitions for Ramoth Gilead and in so doing both to save his own life and to benefit his people. But the king does not repent. Rather, in the language of classic Hebrew idiom, he 'hardens his heart'/'stiffens his neck', simply seeing in Micaiah's words a confirmation of his prejudices.

At this point it might seem that Micaiah has failed. After skilfully mocking the king into requesting a true message, he has delivered his message from the Lord. But he has not been heeded. Micaiah, however, is not intimidated and does not give up. Rather, he speaks again with words of such keen sharpness that they will surely cut through even the hardest of hearts.

*Read vv 19-23:* This second vision of Micaiah is the critical moment in the story – not only in terms of the dynamics of the story, but as that which readers most easily misunderstand. But it should already be clear that the response of the casual reader – 'Isn't God being nasty and immoral, sponsoring deception in order to set Ahab up?' – is largely dependent on taking the text out of context.

The dynamics of the encounter between Ahab and Micaiah are crucial (n.b. that Micaiah begins with 'therefore'). The prophet is faced by the king's refusal to respond positively to his warning. The issue at stake is, in every sense, one of life and death. But how do you get through to someone who doesn't want to hear? Unless it is seen that this is Micaiah's supreme attempt to engage with the king, to penetrate a barrier of complacency, pride and obstinacy, to touch his mind and soften a hardening heart, we will not understand what Micaiah is saying.

Further, the purpose of the vision (vv 19-22) is made crystal clear by Micaiah in his closing words (v 23) in which he interprets the vision to the king. His conclusion, that 'the Lord has decreed disaster for you' makes the vision into a classic prophetic warning, the logic of which we have already seen in relation to Micaiah's first vision. It is a warning whose purpose is fulfilled if it moves the person addressed to respond in such a way that what is envisaged does not actually happen. The second vision has the same purpose as the first vision. If the message is that the king will die, it is given so that the king may not die.

Once this is clear, we can begin to understand the vision itself. Micaiah has a communicative strategy similar to that of Nathan in his famous confrontation with David (2 Sam. 12:1-7). The golden rule is simple: Don't state the obvious. If you simply tell people what they think they already know in categories that they already accept, then they will ignore you; you are at best a bore, at worst a nuisance. So Micaiah cannot just repeat what he has already said (say it again, only louder), but must find some way of expressing his warning to the king in a way that brings home to the king the reality of his situation. Micaiah does not resort to right-sounding religious rhetoric or abstractions (sin, self-will). Rather, he paints a picture and tells a story of such imaginative starkness that the king must surely be moved by it.

The narrator has told in some detail of the court scene in Samaria to which Micaiah has been summoned: the kings on their thrones and their religious courtiers speaking in their presence. Micaiah now tells of another court scene, of a king on his throne surrounded by his courtiers. But now the king is the Lord and the setting is 'heaven'. But 'heaven' does not mean somewhere else – another place, perhaps another time – but rather represents and depicts the spiritual reality of what is happening in the here and now on earth, at the entrance to the gate of Samaria. That is, the relationship between the court of the Lord and the court of Ahab is not that of a causal relationship between two different times and two different places: i.e. first, the Lord makes a decision at his court, and subsequently this is enacted upon Ahab; first a decision is made somewhere else (wherever heaven might be supposed to be), and subsequently it is enacted in Samaria. Rather, God is both *here* and *now*. The court of the Lord is the spiritual counterpart to the court of Ahab, it is the other side of one and the same coin. The scene of the Lord's court interprets to Ahab the reality of his court.

How then should we understand Micaiah's vision? There are three different levels or dimensions within Micaiah's words, though these are all interrelated facets of the one vision, and to take any one dimension in isolation may lead to misunderstanding.

First, there is the ('psychological') level of the communicative dynamics of Micaiah's trying to get through to Ahab. Here the issue focusses around the word used to initiate the plot within the vision, that is the Lord's proposal that someone should 'lure' Ahab. The meaning of the Hebrew word is not in doubt. The basic form of the verb means 'to be simple-minded/foolish' (the sort of person who is easily put upon by others). It is a derogatory term, used by Hosea of Israel when he depicts Israel as 'bird-brained' (Hos. 7:11). The form of the verb here means 'treat as a fool', 'trick' (as Joab accuses Abner of doing to David, 2 Sam. 3:25). Thus God's proposal in Micaiah's vision is 'Who will trick Ahab (make him act like a fool) so that he goes up to Ramoth Gilead and dies there?' In effect, Micaiah is saying to Ahab 'You are being tricked, conned'. The point is that nobody likes being told they are being conned, and nobody willingly goes along with it. If you think you are being conned, you do something different. In this sense, the difference it makes, that it is not just the court prophets (whom Ahab may hold in contempt) but God himself who is conning Ahab, is that it greatly sharpens the challenge – it is a real and serious con, in which the stakes are as high as they could be, and they are for keeps. All the more reason not to acquiesce in the con, not to allow oneself to be tricked. To tell someone that they are being fooled has a similar logic and dynamic to that of warning someone of coming disaster.

The second ('moral') level within Micaiah's vision arises once the trick has been agreed on, with reference to the means by which it is to be carried out. The issue here focusses again on one particular Hebrew word, that which the spirit says it will be in the mouths of Ahab's four hundred prophets, which the Lord commends as sure to succeed ('he's sure to fall for this one'), and which Micaiah confirms in his explanation of the vision. The word is *sheqer* – a word which has many possible renderings in English – 'lie', 'falsehood', 'deception' (NIV 'lying', vv 22,23). *Sheqer* is another fundamental term of Hebrew prophetic language. *Sheqer* is that which prophets speak when they are not sent by YHWH and when they tell people the agreeable and acceptable things that they want to hear; it is at heart a self-serving use of language which lacks integrity and so lacks engagement with God. (Jer. 14:13-14 definitively spells this out.)

We can now understand what it means to say that the message of Ahab's prophets should be designated *sheqer*. What the prophets say lacks integrity. The prophetic message is self-serving because the prophets are telling the king what he wants to hear. But in speaking thus the prophets are reflecting back to the king his own self-will. Here is the moral point of Micaiah's vision. The deceptive message of the prophets is the counterpart to the king's self-seeking. Thus Micaiah complements the psychological challenge to the king not to let himself be duped ('don't be a fool') with the moral challenge to recognize a lack of integrity about the proposal to fight at Ramoth Gilead ('can't you see it's a deceit?').

The third ('theological') level in Micaiah's vision is the God-centred dimension – that the proposal to trick Ahab through putting a self-serving message in the mouth of his prophets be ascribed to the Lord. Micaiah's clear concern is that Ahab should recognize his message as none other than the message of their God. It is not just that he, Micaiah, has 'decreed disaster' for Ahab, but that *the Lord* (the

Hebrew word order is emphatic) has spoken thus. It is God whom Ahab is confronting. What sort of God is the Lord? One whose purpose in sending prophets to announce 'disaster' is a compassionate one, to reach out to and reclaim those who are going astray, so that they may turn to God and so that the disaster may never take place, because the Lord responds to genuine response.

But how is the compassionate concern of God to be communicated to someone resolved on questionable self-will? The announcement of compassion in such a context ('Although you are pursuing your own course, God is merciful to you') will almost always sound to the addressee like acquiescence in, or even encouragement of, the self-willed course of action. Such a message lacks genuine engagement with the realities of human resolve. This means that the message of divine compassion must be expressed in other terms which engage with, and challenge, the human will. In other words, the message of divine compassion must be formulated as a challenge and be presented as, in one way or other, confrontational and adversarial. And this is not just a matter of communicative dynamics but of reality, in that the moral character of God is genuinely opposed to immoral practice.

This is the classic issue of the love and wrath of God, which orthodox theology has always insisted are one and the same reality. For those not turning to God, the encounter with God is intrinsically an encounter with the wrath of God; for, in the dynamics of genuine encounter, the compassionate engagement of God with the human is unwelcome and threatening unless and until positive response is made. Moreover, the engagement does not, and cannot, leave people where they were previously, for response of some kind to God is inevitable. But the one who does not respond positively is by that very lack of response driven further away from a true response. In classic Hebrew terms, when the initiative of God does not engender 'repentance', it engenders 'hardness of heart'/'stiffness of neck'. This is not just a description of the subsequent state of a person, but also a description of what is happening in the moment of encounter. In short, as language about the love and wrath, or sovereignty, of God cannot be understood as an abstraction isolated from the dynamics of relationship and engagement with God, so Micaiah's depiction of God's mercy as hostility towards Ahab cannot be understood if abstracted from the dynamics of Micaiah's encounter with Ahab.

Once Micaiah's vision is seen for what it is, as a supreme attempt to touch the king's heart and mind with the reality of Israel's God, we are amazed at the depth and power of Micaiah's speech. Surely it cannot leave the king unmoved.

*Read vv 24-28:* At this point Zedekiah intervenes. Zedekiah, as leader of the court prophets, is the person who stands to lose the most if the king heeds Micaiah. So his intervention is to ensure that a possibly wavering king remembers who his real friends and advisers are.

Zedekiah performs another action, as much a symbolic action as was his previous wielding of iron horns (v 11). He hits Micaiah, to humiliate and hurt him. At the same time he asks a clever rhetorical question, which seeks to change the whole dynamics of the moment. For if Micaiah tries to answer such a question on its own terms, i.e. to justify or explain his bold prophetic speaking, Zedekiah would



hold the initiative in interrogating a defensive Micaiah. Micaiah has no justification beyond that contained in what he has already said. Micaiah, therefore, does not waver but responds with a challenge to Zedekiah.

The point of Micaiah's words at first seems obscure. Is it another vision? Is it a riddle? It is neither. Its point can be seen in the logic of his wording in his context. Why might Zedekiah 'go to hide in an inner room'? The 'inner room' is not a place of piety (for prayer) or modesty (a privy), but the most obscure place possible within a building (a cubby hole of some kind or other), the place where you hide when you are trying to escape from people who want to kill you (cf. I Kings. 20:30). When you are hiding for your life is when you pray to God for safety; it is when, fearful of discovery and death, you are vulnerable. The meaning of Micaiah's words, then, is this. At the present moment Zedekiah is deflecting any possible danger to his own fraudulent position by abusing Micaiah. As such, the reality before God of what he is saying and doing is hidden from him, for in abusing Micaiah he is hardening his heart. But if a time comes when Zedekiah seeks God in his own hour of need, a time when Zedekiah's own life is threatened, his future hangs by a thread, and he genuinely turns to God, then the truth will become clear to him and he will know how it was that God spoke through Micaiah.

For the present, however, Zedekiah's action and words are decisive. The king does not heed Micaiah, but arrests him and orders him to be detained. The king's final words, that Micaiah be held in prison on minimum subsistence 'until I return safely' – which, in terms of what Micaiah has said, will not happen, and so anticipates a possible life sentence for Micaiah – may be one last attempt by the king to get Micaiah to change his message to one of 'peace'/'good', so that Micaiah may escape incarceration.

Micaiah does not flinch. Although he may be signing his own death warrant he reaffirms the content of his message and warning. If the king is indeed successful at Ramoth Gilead, then Micaiah is prepared to recognize that his own words have been empty.

*Read vv 29-33:* The king has decided to seek his moment of glory at Ramoth Gilead. Yet, probably because in his heart he recognizes that Micaiah was speaking truly, he cannot savour his longed-for battle for he is too afraid. With a kind of perverse logic that is so characteristic of human attempts to evade God, he thinks that he can 'get round' God's words by a trick of his own. If he is a 'marked man' because of Micaiah's warning – and perhaps being aware that the king of Aram regards him as the cause of the warfare and so wants to single him out – then he will remove his public markings and become, as it were, invisible. If he can survive he may yet triumph. The Arameans are initially taken in by this ruse and think that Jehoshaphat in his robes must be Ahab. They soon discover their error. But if Ahab remains invisible can the Arameans do anything about it?

*Read vv 34-38:* The end comes so simply. Ahab's device works, and he remains unrecognized. Nobody points him out, not even God. Rather, an Aramean archer acts 'innocently', that is, not specifically targeting Ahab, and his arrow finds not

just Ahab but also the chink in his armour, so as to give a fatal wound. Ahab lives a little longer but only to see his army defeated. And so it becomes apparent that Ahab's campaign plan was indeed foolish, and that the message of Zedekiah and the four hundred prophets was indeed a falsehood. Micaiah's words receive the fulfilment that they never sought. God is not mocked, and even in unintentional human action his purposes are fulfilled.

## Conclusion

Three concluding reflections. First, Micaiah, like Jeremiah, was a 'failure'. His message was unheeded and his life ends in obscurity, with the last known circumstances hard and uncongenial. Yet even if Micaiah, like Jeremiah, was not heeded at the time by those to whom he spoke, he was not wholly unheeded. Someone recognized such men as speaking the truth of God, and it is because of that recognition that the stories have been told and preserved in a context where their content could continue to speak for God. Speaking faithfully for God may have an afterlife that no one would have thought of at the time – as the follower of Jesus, above all others, should know. The preacher today stands in a long and ancient line whose peculiar joys and sorrows need to be freshly understood, not least in a culture which increasingly measures worth with superficial and short-term judgements.

Secondly, the isolated stance and hard message of Micaiah represents a recurrent feature of faithful preaching. Yet it is vital neither to romanticize this (the preacher as ecclesial equivalent of the lone hero or anti-hero, a kind of John Wayne or Clint Eastwood of the pulpit), nor to misunderstand what is involved. In particular, the fact that one preaches an unpopular or confrontational message is of itself no guarantee that one is preaching a true and faithful message ('if nobody listens to me, it must be their fault, their problem'). For what characterizes Micaiah's engagement with Ahab is a profound grasp of the realities of the royal court and of the nature of the person he was speaking to, coupled with rhetorical skill of a high order, within the context of a sure grasp of the nature of God and of the dynamics of life with God. Micaiah had done his homework. We cannot hope to follow in his line unless we do ours.

Finally, how does one tell between conflicting voices, when all speak in the name of the Lord? Although there can be no simple answer, the story nonetheless sets out one prime criterion of decision-making, a criterion which is central to scripture as a whole. That criterion is integrity – doing what is right, living the truth. What the king has to choose between is, in essence, his own self-seeking desire, as expressed and represented by his prophets (v 6, 12), and Micaiah's warning that he is neglecting his duty and jeopardizing his life (v 17). Even before Micaiah has spoken, a certain kind of integrity is what the king grudgingly recognizes as characterizing Micaiah (v 8). Micaiah challenges the king about the integrity of his proposed action, and in his climactic appeal he is most explicit. There is no integrity about the prophetic encouragement to fight at Ramoth Gilead. It is a message which only a fool will heed, because it is deceit, and it is deceit because it represents an

outworking of Ahab's heedless self-will. But the real nature of human self-seeking, and of the integrity or truth which is the alternative to it, only becomes clear when Micaiah sets the whole situation of the human court within the heavenly court. To illuminate a particular human situation, what it really is, and what possibilities are really open to it, by locating it within the presence and activity of the living God – this remains the privilege and the responsibility of the Christian preacher.

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