

God's passion for justice

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne All Saints Belmont August 11th 2019

Keynote Bible passage: Micah 6.6 – 8

The Old Testament prophet Micah was numbered among the 'minor prophets' probably because of the length of the book of his sayings – just 7 chapters compared with Isaiah's 66 and Ezekiel's 48. Yet he played an important role in bringing the message of God to the people of his day. His writings date from 701 to 715 BC and he is a contemporary of Amos and Hosea.

Probably the most well-known passages of his writings are the prophecy that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem of Judea, a reading often heard Advent worship services, and the saying which is today's theme verse: 'What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.'

So let us first consider the historical context of the book, and then the message of God's concern for justice flowing through it, and specifically the theme verse.

1) In the *context of history* it was a time when Assyria and Egypt were the great powers, of the 8th century BC. If one could imagine the headlines of the day it would be recording the victories of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib. There would be sieges of various towns until they surrendered and those captured were carried off into exile as slaves. Especially he was seeking to prevail against the smaller kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

2) It was the role of the prophets to commentate on the religious meaning of the political and social events into which the people were caught up. That is, how could Yahweh, God's purposes be discerned, and how the people were to act in the circumstances. In this context a writer has described prophecy as '*the voice God has lent to the silent agony of humanity.*' Overall their message was that prophets sought to help people realise that even in the depths of their catastrophe and suffering, God was present, providing the impulse from a road leading to ruin, and offering a new life.

Micah is especially concerned about injustice. He denounces rulers, priests and prophets; deplores the money-grubbing exploitation of the helpless, dishonesty in business and sham religion. He does then see a glorious future, when Jerusalem will become the religious centre of the world and Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah.

To establish God's message for the people Micah *creates a courtroom scene*. It acts out a drama – the prosecuting counsel is the Lord and invites the defendant to 'plead his case'. The trial also has a cosmic setting, it takes place among witnesses – heaven and earth, mountains and hills.' 'You mountains and hills, you everlasting foundations of the earth, listen to the Lord's case'.

Then the prosecuting counsel brings the charge. Yahweh has been offended and asks, 'O my people what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you. Answer me.' The counsel YHWH recalls how he has acted in the past, for the people, bringing them out of Egypt, and through other acts of survival, 'i.e. the saving acts of the Lord.'

Then the defence responds and asks what is the appropriate action to enable peace with the prosecuting counsel. Several options are advanced, there's the traditional sacrificial offerings, calves a year old, thousands of rams, and rivers

(gallons) of (olive) oil from the harvest. Or, dare it be suggested – child sacrifice of the first-born. Will that be sufficient to placate the prosecution, for taking YHWH for granted?

Then it is as if Micah steps in as judge, passing judgment, and what is expected: 'He has told you O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you?...'. But judgment is what they get, for unfaithfulness, for dishonesty, violence and wickedness, to be invaded and overpowered; the land will become desolate and there will be famine and suffering. (This is what occurred, the Assyrian army overran the kingdom, and in due course many were carried into exile in Babylon. So – what is expected of the people – quite simple: 'to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.' Matters of justice were 'key' for 8th century prophets and they considered the punishment that came on the people was the consequence of injustice.

3) The *keynote verse* has three aspects, first to '*do justice*.' This has international implications

Today there rightly concern for the injustice powerful nations against weaker, as for example Saudi Arabia against Yemen. Nationally there seems a widening gap between haves and have-less, and a favouritism that seems to advantage the well-off. If we could apply the prophet's message it would be to seek to bring about working with God for justice and righteousness to prevail. To seek to change unjust structures of society is a key mission imperative, and to be on the side of those who would regard themselves as being 'the last the lost and the least.

Second, to *love kindness* or as Jerusalem Bible renders it, to 'love tenderly.' This has surely been a strength of the Christian church in its pastoral caring. It would include a desire for peace and to work for reconciliation where needed and healing of relationships. As did Jesus setting an example, a reaching out with mercy and compassion.. The parable of the Good Samaritan surely has application for today for those in less fortunate circumstances. Whilst one wouldn't desire how it happened, the mosque shootings did highlight the extent to which it is important to get alongside new immigrants to our country.

Thirdly *to walk humbly with your God*. How do we seek to live this? I'm reminded of the imagery in the scene in the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman 'heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze...' (Gen 3.8). Or of Psalm 23: 'He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul, he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake....A poet song-writer expresses it this way: 'O Lord you lead me by the still waters. Quietly restoring my soul. You speak words of wisdom, the promise of glory, the power of the presence of God.'

Thus for me it is having a sense of God's presence in everyday life. As we appreciate the beauty of creation, in breathing in the fragrances, in appreciating loving relationships, there God is. I note the way it is expressed, with 'your God'. That suggests for each our experience of God is different, yet authentic. We share it in common yet it is also an individualistic experience. That's why we cannot say 'I know how you feel.' So as we today walk humbly with our God, we sense this presence.

In summary then the message Micah is seeking to convey in interpreting the events of his day was that Jehovah was concerned for justice in society. He regarded the people and nation's misfortunes as outcomes of disobedience. His message - from God preached a way to live following God's will - to do justice,, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. It's a timeless message.

