



Micah 6.1-8
Matthew 5.1-12
29th January 2023

It's our attitudes that dictate our actions

Minister: Gracious God
**All: May your Living Word come to us
 afresh this morning**
 Minister: So ,touch, we pray our minds and hearts
 with your grace and truth
**All: Through Christ our Lord
 and in the power of your Spirit. Amen**

It might almost be the stuff of a blockbuster film, an adaptation like Lord of the Rings, God takes his people to court. Imagine the scene and fill in which actors you think might play the parts.

Of course, this is just something to be imagined, yet Micah could be a convincing screenwriter. *Stand up*, he says to God, *and state your case before the mountains*.

Well, that case is found in the second half of chapter six, the bit we didn't read this morning, and in short, the accusation was hypocrisy. The sort that comes about when there is a disconnect between what we say in our prayers and sing in our worship and the way we live in our daily lives, especially the way we treat other people.

So, in Micah's day religious leaders and so-called religious people were making a big show of their religiosity. Yet, such flamboyant ritual missed the point. It never touched that part of life that really matters – the way we live together in a caring and compassionate community.

And it's against this backstory that Micah introduces us to the idea that God is so outraged by this false religious way that lacked kindness to others that he, metaphorically speaking, launches a legal case against the people. He is angry and although it's not the usual response you expect from heaven, he says, as it were: *See you in court*.

Come the day of the trial and God starts his case against them by asking a question: *My people, what have I done to you?*

In other words, he expresses his immense frustration that those who profess to believe in him don't act like him.

This is the God who brought a slave bound people out of their captivity in Egypt, this is the God who gifted them liberation and freedom.

This is the God who gave them talented and charismatic leaders to guide them on their journey, the God who understands them and stands by them through thick and thin.

Now this is important because all too often we hear people say things like: *I like the God of the New Testament, but not the harsh and austere God of the Old.*

Nothing could be further from that understanding in today's reading, as this is the God who role models love, kindness and justice.

Yet, because in the public square his representatives were ignoring the poor and supporting the oppressive policies of the wealthy lawmakers God was angry. An anger not rooted in power but love. An anger expressing concern for others.

So, in our imaginary cosmic court with the mountains and hills looking on – Micah imagines how the people might respond.

And their answer to this divine enquiry about what might have gone so fundamentally wrong in their society is this; *What shall we bring when we come before the Lord....are we to come before him with whole offerings and with yearling calves...*

What?! Is this really your response?!

So, at this point in our imaginary film, the camera would, I think, swing round to God to catch a look of utter disbelief and incredulity upon the face of the divine.

Those in the dock have missed the point, it's not more ritual and religiosity that's needed but more love and integrity.

We can almost hear God's sorrowful sigh at this point in the proceedings. And Micah isn't buying it either.

Verse 8 is such a significant one in today's passage and it has a cutting beauty about it that is meant to pierce any heart: *The Lord has told you what is good, and what it is that the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

It's a triplet that encapsulates outward looking faith, and one bible commentator has put it like this: *Rather than offering God thousands of rams, Micah calls the people to offer a thousand daily acts of love for each other and the world God loves.*

We are indebted to prophets like Amos and Micah who challenge us to see faith not in terms of putting down a deposit for a secure afterlife but as a call to enter into a relationship with God and neighbour that is transformative for this life. This sort of faith 're-orientates' us and makes us see our politics, our work, our family and our community in a new light. It calls us to critique all our activities under this triplet of faith: *Am I doing justice, loving with mercy and walking humbly with God?*

Now, today's passage from the Jewish scriptures is linked in the lectionary with that opening one from Matthew 5. The start of a collection of sayings which the New Testament bunches together and calls The Sermon on the Mount. Richard Rohr calls this Sermon *Jesus' plan for a new world*.

And, in Matthew that sermon begins with Beatitudes such as *Blessed are the merciful, the gentle and the peacemakers*.

Anyone listening to those phrases in Jesus' day would undoubtedly have recognised them because they all come from various parts of the Jewish scriptures that were regularly read at Synagogue services. Take for example *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. You'll find much the same thing said, almost word for word, in Psalm 37 verse 11. Yet here, in Matthew 5, Jesus sows them together to describe someone whose attitudes have been soaked in God's love and justice. Reminding us, yet again, that it's always our attitudes that dictate and flavour our actions.

The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes seen by us Christians as a rebranding by Jesus of the Jewish Law. So, we take phrases like *You have heard it said: Do not murder, but I say to you, do not be angry* – as Jesus somehow repealing the law, or at least re-inventing it, and perhaps that fits with the idea of him in The Sermon on the Mount being seen as a new Moses giving a new law.

Well, although that may indeed be one of Matthew's big themes in his gospel, in many ways, all Jesus is doing here is preaching in a typically rabbinic way. For often rabbis would say in their sermons: *You have heard it said, but I say to you*.

Our Jewish cousins have a nice phrase for this, they call it *building a fence around the Torah*.

It's as if, before we get to the really big issues like adultery and murder, we must build a fence around them to stop us going there, by addressing our attitudes to lesser issues which may lead us into bigger problems. To avoid adultery, build a fence and deal with lust. To prevent murder, build a fence and sort out anger.

So, isn't this where today's two passages merge. It's our attitudes that dictate our actions. The way we think determines how we behave.

It's as if Jesus is saying to us; This is what my Father's Kingdom looks like – it's full of peacemakers, merciful people, those who are poor by this world's standards but rich in faith and spiritual insight.

Put like that and it all sounds rather gentle and passive, in actual fact the Beatitudes are radically subversive.

Just as folk in Micah's and Jesus' day could go off message, so can we. All of us can probably remember times when we've slightly, or significantly, lost our way on the faith path. Our perspective of what's really important might have become blurred. Or we might, for a moment, have taken our eyes off what really matters about God.

I suspect that both Micah and Jesus suspected that many around them might have been tempted to come up with Beatitudes which read something like this:

*Blessed are the patriots, for theirs is the reign of Empire.
 Rewarded are the tough minded for they win at all costs.
 Happy are the militaristic, for they are taking the world by force.*

But that's not how either Micah or Jesus speak. Instead, they called for an alternative mindset. A way of seeing that starts with justice, mercy and humility. A triplet of faith that would so infuse our attitudes that our actions become flavoured with the love and character of God.

The Christian writer, Brian McLaren, says *The Beatitudes describe a topsy-turvy reality, an upside-down world view that is at the centre of faith.*

In a world obsessed with power, Jesus and Micah talk of justice. In a world longing for success, they advocate humility. In a world where others are so often thought of as dispensable, they preach mercy and ongoing loyalty.

In bringing this morning's sermon to a close I just want to return to that triplet of faith that absolutely cuts through and glistens in our first reading: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.*

I think that's such a healthy corrective to one of the biggest mistakes sometimes made about faith, and that's locking it away and making a disconnect between it and everyday living. That travesty of this way of thinking is promulgated by phrases like *Sacred and Secular* as if there is an inevitable and desirable divide between the two. It promotes the myth that we act differently in church than we do at work or in a shop, so Sundays and Mondays don't connect.

So this triplet of faith makes connections.

To do justice – is the way we live in society, it touches the outer ring of our lives.

To love mercy – is the way we walk alongside individuals, offering constant loyalty, giving people second chances – that touches the closest ring of our outer lives.

And to walk humbly with God – is the way we listen out for the whisper of the divine in our everyday experiences - and that touches the inner ring of our lives.

No division between the sacred and the secular, just a connected and interwoven whole, in which our attitudes influence and flavour our actions.

May it be so in the name of God, our creator, redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.