

Micah [1:3-5]; 5:2-4; 6:6-8

This week we move from the stories of Joshua, David, Solomon, and Elisha in the Histories to the Prophets. Today we will hear from the prophet Micah, who lived in a rural village south of Jerusalem, in an area that had been invaded by a neighbouring empire. Micah was concerned that the leaders who lived in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem were making choices that served their own wealth and power but had negative effects on the people who lived out in the countryside. He brought God's word to challenge both the leaders and the everyday people to be faithful together, rather than each thinking they could live without affecting the other.

Micah was one of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. These are twelve short-winded prophets. Each one is only a few chapters long. Micah is only seven chapters long. Micah was a contemporary of Hosea, Isaiah, and Amos with a similar message.

His language is especially sharp and pointed, particularly when it comes to the evil of Israel's cities. Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, will be punished because of its rebellion and idolatry. Jerusalem, of the southern kingdom of Israel, is also guilty of idolatry, as well as wickedness and evil deeds that include the coveting and the taking of the fields of others as well as the "oppression of householder and house." On and on, Micah rails at the patent injustices of the smug leaders of the cities of Israel.

Micah was preaching just before the end of the good times, just before the fall of Israel and Judah. There had been forty years of prosperity and peace. During times of prolonged prosperity and peace, people often forget God, ignore God, turn away from God. C.S. Lewis wrote that "Human history is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will

make him happy.” For forty years, people got caught up in “the good life”, and slowly began to forget God and his way. So the prophet Micah spoke to the people of God before their country and their life began to fall apart.

Micah describes widespread religiosity where people are making a public show of how religious they are with loud lip service to God. Business-as-usual religion has kept religious leaders self-satisfied and the powerful in power. Into the disillusionment and disappointment, Micah proclaims God’s promise of a new kind of ruler and a new kind of relationship. Micah prophesies that the current state of failed leadership is not the end of the story. God – as we have seen throughout the story of the relationship between God and his people – once again has other plans - a new idea. A new ruler will come from “one of the little clans”, from Bethlehem. Now, for Hebrew ears, Bethlehem signals several things - surprising things.

First, it is the house of David, the most beloved ruler. Second, it is considered the “boonies”, outside the centre of power and privilege. Third, just to be sure we don’t miss the point, Micah calls it “one of the little clans”, indicating its insignificance and low status. Lastly, this *new kind* of ruler is not the stereotypical picture of a mighty leader who wields power, prestige and wins battles. Yes, God has a new plan.

The Trial

The air is tense. God and the people of Israel are in the middle of a lawsuit. They have come to court to see who is at fault in their fractured relationship. Micah’s imagination bursts its bonds as he envisions a gigantic courtroom where the evil monsters of Israel find themselves arraigned for their crimes. Picture the scene. The bailiffs escort, perhaps rather roughly, the defendant, Israel, into the room. Hands are bound, feet shackled, as it shuffles up to the box. On Israel’s left is the jury, and a most peculiar one it is! Sitting in the jury

box are the vast mountains of the earth, the hills that have stood the test of time. They sit in their earthy splendour, covered in trees and soil, cocking their dusty ears toward the prosecuting attorney who is none other than the great YHWH, creator of all in the room. Silence.

Then the mighty YHWH turns to the jury and proclaims, “the Lord has a case against his people; he has a dispute with Israel!” YHWH speaks first with a powerful anguish. “O My people, how have I wronged you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!” In a divine self-accusation YHWH first wonders just what YHWH has done to bring about the evils of Israel. However, we quickly learn that it is by no fault of YHWH that Israel has gone bad.

A historical survey of God’s actions for the people begins. God acted for them in the exodus from Egypt, the quintessential exploit of God in their history. YHWH’s question, “what have I done”, is answered here: God has been for them from the exodus. Surely they have not turned evil because of that great act on their behalf?

The history lesson continues. Moses, the lawgiver and leader, Aaron, the spokesperson before pharaoh, Miriam, the song leader and dancer, celebrating the mysterious victory at the sea of Reeds, these three persons summarize the wonder and power of God’s gift of the exodus from Egypt, the leaving, the surviving, the celebration. After reciting God’s many saving acts, the prosecuting attorney, that is, God - pleads for Israel to remember all these “saving acts of YHWH”. “Have any of these deeds led you to the monstrous evils you have done in my land?” How could any people experience such acts of grace-filled power, and then become what you have become?”

And the defendant speaks. Israel does not admit guilt: it does not ask for

forgiveness. It merely wants a way out: it wants to know what this angry God really wants from them. Perhaps our worship is wrong; perhaps we have not been serious enough in our acts of praise? “What do you want, YHWH? Burnt offerings, year-old calves, thousands of rams, tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Not enough? Not serious enough? Then, “how about my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my life?”

It turns out that YHWH cares for none of these. Worship is not your problem: right worship, different liturgies, livelier songs, guitars and bands, are not our problem. “God has told you, O mortal, what is good.” You want to know, “what does YHWH require?” Now the prophet speaks. In his prophetic voice Micah tells the recalcitrant and evil Israelites what their God really wants from them: ***What does the Lord require? Hello! Is Anyone there listening???*** ***Have you heard one word I have spoken? Do you see the injustices all around you? What does the Lord require?***

Following the prediction of a new kind of ruler God has promised, Micah turns to the new relationship that God wants with God’s people. First we hear the people’s response to the accusations. They resort to the well-worn form of score-keeping to appease God: “What payment will it take to get God off our backs? Burnt offerings? Thousands of rams? My firstborn? How can we even the scoreboard?”

Micah contrasts this knee-jerk score-keeping to the path God has already presented, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good.” The entire Torah - along with a long line of prophets - has already given God’s people the path to a rich life. Micah offers a summation of what God required, simple yet more difficult than keeping ritual practices: “to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with your God”, or “to do what is right, love mercy, and humbly walk with your God”. This is a new way of life, a new way of being in

relationship. These are not single acts that can be checked off the list and left behind.

The Summation

What God required of people in the days of Micah are the same things that God requires of us today. To do justice, that there would be fairness, fair play and equity within the human family. Justice is hard work. It asks us to work together, to truthfully critique the present unjust systems, to find new ways to change the system. It asks the wealthy nations of the world to give back. Justice is able to disrupt, dismantle, breakdown, disarm, and transform systems and people when we dare to see what is really happening here and around the world. We need to understand that every human being matters, that God matters, that doing justice is closely intertwined with lovingkindness and mercy. As we witness injustices, tragedies, atrocities, lovingkindness or mercy moves us to doing something about it as we dare to change what is unjust. We are called to work for fairness for the little people of our world. Our faith must be active in the public sphere to be living faith at all.

Justice is working for the little people of our society and world, working for the widow, fatherless, orphans, poor, hungry, stranger, needy, weak and oppressed, so they get their fair share, that they are treated with fairness. Micah and his partner prophets are very clear that a follower of the Lord does justice. Moses: "Justice and only justice you shall follow." The psalmist, "God loves justice and righteousness and steadfast love." Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

Working for justice requires activity in public realm, the realm of politics, government, economy, and society. Justice is not about treating everyone the same. Justice is about ensuring that everyone has what they need. This required both direct actions to alleviate suffering and working for the

transformation of the systems that cause or ignore that suffering.

Love kindness. We all know what kindness is. Compassion, sympathy, gentleness, benevolence, helpfulness. We see it every day and we are grateful. The use of “kindness” here is not an unreasonable translation, but it doesn’t quite pack the punch that the Hebrew word *hesed* carries. *Hesed* is a multilayered idea, connoting covenant fidelity - the kind of persistent, unflagging loyalty that God shows Israel. Being kind is an important value, and certainly kindness is in short supply these days. But Micah pushes our understanding of being kind beyond niceties that fit a meme, bumper sticker or t-shirt, and into the realm of lasting, meaningful relationships.

At the end of the semester, theology students at Harvard were preparing for the ministry. These theology students were taking their final examination on the topic: Kant’s ‘Moral Imperative’. Kant was a French moral philosopher. The final examination for this class gave the students two hours to write their moral philosophy with a ten minute break in the middle. The students wrote furiously for fifty five minutes. Then the bell rang; the students all took a break and went out into the hallway. There in the hallway was another student, not part of their class, sitting humped up on the floor, dishevelled, looking a real mess. The students were busy in conversation with each other, getting a drink of water, taking a bathroom break, and returned to the classroom for the second hour of writing their philosophy of what it meant to be a moral human being.

Weeks later, the students received their test results: they had all failed. That is, all the students thought that their test was what they wrote for two hours in the classroom. The professor meanwhile was standing out in the hallway during the ten minute break and grading them on who approached the man humped down on the floor and who spoke a kind word. Nobody did. Not a

one!

Jesus told the story about the Good Samaritan. A man was robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. Three people passed safely on the other side of the road. It was only the Samaritan who stopped, knelt down and offered to help. Kindness. Mercy. Gentleness. The ingredient that God demands from his disciples is fundamental human kindness ... to family, friends, work associates, classmates, and strangers in the hallway.

“*Hesed*” or loving kindness is the unbreakable connection that YHWH has with us. And because of that connection, we are expected to strive for a similar connection with our neighbours. When one shows genuine loving kindness, one will always do justice. And we are invited to walk humbly with our God.

Walk humbly with your God. Walk implies slow. Walk implies measured. Walking is the opposite of running. Walking is a slow deliberate pace. Humbly. Not full of yourself. Not preoccupied with yourself. Jesus said that the greatest person in the kingdom of God was a person who was humble like a little child. Jesus said that the greatest virtue of all the virtues was humility. Paul, said that Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death.” The followers of Jesus were called by the name of Christian only once, but they were repeatedly called servants. Humble servants were on the opposite continuum from kings, queens and royalty.

To walk humbly with your God; your God is personal to you; your God, who made you; your God who walks with you every step of every day; your God who walks with you in the valleys of the shadows of death; your God who walks with you when you climb the highest mountains of life; your God who

walks with you as you walk the circle of life.

“Walk humbly with your God” is also translated: “live obediently before your God” and “walk attentively with your God”. Always be aware of God’s call for justice, for *hesed*. We are to be not so much humble as alert, not so much humble as attentive to God’s essential call to us. That is what God wants for us.

Rather than attending a worship service and then doing whatever we want for the rest of the week, Micah calls us into an ongoing relationship with God that affects all that we do. Right relationship with God is an ongoing seven-day-a-week orientation to life, one that prioritises the well-being of the neighbour, making a life of worship also a life of doing justice, loving with generosity and fidelity, and journeying in humility with God.

The Verdict

Court is finally adjourned. The verdict is rendered. Guilty, announces the judge, who is also the prosecutor. You are guilty of misunderstanding what YHWH requires. Justice, not worship. Justice, not oppression. Justice, only justice.

Micah reminds us of God’s mission for the world: a new kind of ruler and a new kind of relationship. So what does a new kind of ruler and a new kind of relationship have to do with us? How can we see our story within God’s story? Many pieces of Micah’s context are familiar - a once-great nation in identity crisis, political leaders who disappoint, reliance on violence, rote religiosity, and despair of any way forward. The promise of a new kind of ruler and a new kind of relationship speaks to hungry hearts today.

Embedded in our lives are score-keeping relationships with God and others. We may even prefer it. We, like the Israelites, commodify our relationships. Sometimes it can sound like this: What will it take to get my - husband, wife, co-worker, sister, church, teacher, God to do what I want them to do?

Other times it's more subtle: What minimum hoop-jumping will count as faithfulness? We observe racial quotas on committees in place of seeking racial justice. We send cheques for disaster, famine, epidemic relief, yet avoid examining the lifestyles that contribute, at least in part, to these. We do hunger walks and refuse to change our consumerist lifestyles. We confess with our lips on Sunday morning and hold grudges at work on Monday.

Rather than offer God thousands of rams, Micah calls us to offer a thousand daily acts of love for each other and for the world God loves. "Walk humbly with God" means knowing our bent to self-righteousness. We cannot "play church" or frame our religious life as a game where we keep God in check by performing prescribed duties. The life of faith is a *walk* that reorients heart and life.

Micah invites us to reframe our lives into a new relationship with a new kind of ruler. This ruler proclaims a new kind of relationship not based on score-keeping or our ability to appease God, but on divine love and justice - the reign of God.

In our society, to love kindness does not come easily. Perhaps this is because loving tenderly involves one knowing confidently one is loved and is able to take the risk to be moved, to be vulnerable, and to be able to see another person's suffering as one's own.

To walk humbly is not to be above someone or below someone, but rather

with someone. It is not thinking you can do it all on your own, carrying the burdens upon your limited human shoulders. It is not forgetting you are human. It is not living without grace. It is not playing God. So maybe walking humbly with God is about paying attention, paying attention to who we are and what is around us, listening to the cries and the stories of other human beings as well as to our own stories waiting on God. Micah said, "I will wait on God and God will hear me."

Our lives have been filled with wars, shootings, and bombings in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, in the Middle East, when children are kidnapped, die of hunger, people die of preventable diseases. The wars never stop as we have seen in the atrocities and tens of thousands of deaths in Ukraine. How do we bring peace to such a world? The only way to bring peace is to bring justice to God's people and to our world. All wars, conflicts, hatred, racism, prejudice are the result of injustice, often presented as greed, hoarding, and search for power. Wars, conflicts, hatred can be eliminated with genuine loving-kindness. We can do this if human beings gather around the world, talking with one another, having discussions, getting to know each other, praying together, and standing up to say, "No more! No More!"

Let us all walk together humbly with our God, show loving kindness and do what is right, working for justice for all. Without justice in our communities, nations, and the world, there will never be peace. Do justice, and then perhaps, we will bring lasting peace to our world. To remember is to work for peace. **Amen.**

PRAYERS FOR THE WORLD

(God of love: **make us a channel of your peace**)

United with your saints across time and place, we pray for our shared world.

A Brief Silence

Reviving God, keep your church active in its mission and ministry. Encourage bishops, deacons, pastors, and lay leaders to risk boldly in their proclamation and fill them with wisdom and endurance for challenging times.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Renewing God, as the northern hemisphere prepares for winter, make us mindful of the ordered beauty of your creation. Teach us to treasure cycles of rest and new life. Help us care for what you have made.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Loving God, accompany all who make sacrifices for the sake of others. Safeguard first responders and active duty military personnel. Grant peace to veterans and heal any wounds in body, mind, or spirit.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Healing God, your people cry out to you. Sustain doctors, nurses, and hospital personnel in their tireless work. Uphold mental health professionals and those in their care. May the sun of righteousness rise on all who are sick. We uplift in prayer Gladys Thomas and the Orphanage in Haiti that they be kept safe from kidnapping and violence.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Uniting God, unite this assembly in its shared mission and ministry for the sake of the gospel. Highlight ways we can better work together and give us patience to work through disagreement.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Consoling God, abide with all who grieve for loved ones who have died. Help them feel your presence.

God of love: **make us a channel of your peace.**

Accept these prayers, gracious God, and those known only to you; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, **Amen.**