

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 30 January 2014

Micah 6: 1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

Today's gospel and Micah's prophetic message both provide us with texts for contemplative reflection. We can approach these texts as giving us an orientation, and also a process for our own renewal, they are like the process of making new year's resolutions, or perhaps resolutions for "A New Creation".

In the first reading Micah describes the context for this process of renewal as a controversy, or a contention between 'the Lord' and the 'Israel'; and that is an invitation to us to consider our own interaction and encounter with our knowing our fullest humanity, and our claim as being the 'body of Christ'.

The revelation of Christmas is the enfleshing of divinity, "God became Man"; "*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" [John 1:14]; creator and creature, one body revealed in Christ and to be realised in us.

So we read Micah's process as an invitation for us to identify the controversy and contention within ourselves (individually and collectively) as we become, as we enflesh, our Christ-likeness.

The opening lines illuminate and underline for us the universal nature of each life (no man is an island); "*plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice*". It is both sobering and affirming for us to know that our life, and every life, is integral to the "*enduring foundations of the earth*".

Verse three questions us, it opens us to the process of self-reflection, and then in verse four the start of the reflective process is 'remembering'. And this is something we might all try for ourselves, a listing off of the very blessings, the Divine giving, that has given shape and scope to our lives. It is an opportunity to consider the opportunities that have been there for us to appropriate, whether or not we actually did.

Verse five continues the process of remembering but now our reflection is turned toward our worldly interactions. Through the mention of Balak and Balaam we're invited to consider the ruling powers which have had an influence on our own life journey and the geographical context of our living is brought to mind through the remembering of "*what happened from Shittim to Gilgal*", perhaps deliberately chosen:

*"While Israel was camped at **Shittim** (Acacia Grove), the men began to have sex with the Moabite women. It started when the women invited the men to their sex-and-religion worship.*

They ate together and then worshiped their gods. Israel ended up joining in the worship of the Baal of Peor. God was furious, his anger blazing out against Israel.” [Numbers 25:1-3]

*“The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in **Gilgal** on the east border of Jericho. **20** Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, **21** saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean?" **22** then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.”*[Joshua 4:19-22]

When we use these texts for our reflection, they give us a frame work so that we can view the landscape of our life experience, from the place(s) we have gone astray to those wonderful places where we crossed the Jordan and found dry ground, the places where we have built altars to God.

Next in Micah’s process comes the questioning of what we give; *“With what shall I come before the LORD”?*

What are the offerings that will be our response to the divine activity of blessing; what is the giving that is enabling of, and engaging with the dynamic giving of God?

By way of suggestion, Micah proposes: *“Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? **7** Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

And of course, Micah gives us an answer that very much illustrates the prophetic perspective of life that he is inviting us to reflect on:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

To actually grasp what Micah is saying we will each have to walk ourselves through the process he has outlined in the first reading, and perhaps that itself is good resolution for the new year.

The voice of Micah would have been a familiar voice to Jesus and the Jewish community he inhabited, and we might therefore speculate that he also contemplated the text: *“what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

When we read the gospels we are looking at the prophetic worldview in a way that is given very real and practical grounding in, and through, the life of Christ..

In the words of Christ, and of the gospel writers we have an opportunity to see the prophetic vision in the process of realisation; and that gives us a more readily accessible process for looking at our own lives and the journey we are unfolding.

The setting for today's gospel is the 'sermon on the mount', and so we might listen alongside the first listeners....

“3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven”

Another version, or a paraphrasing of the Beatitudes was posted on the discussion group this week, it comes from a program run by Philip Newell:

"Blessed are those who know their need for theirs is the grace of heaven."

"Blessed are those who weep for their tears will be wiped away

"Blessed are those who are humble for they are close to the sacred earth."

"Blessed are those who hunger for earth's oneness for they will be satisfied."

"Blessed are the forgiving for they are free."

"Blessed are the clear in heart for they see the Living Presence."

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they are born of God."

In the process that Micah outlined in the first reading there is an opportunity for us to discover what Micah's insight means: *“what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

More than that we will be led to contemplate our own version of *what does the LORD require of you* and of me and of us?

And then we might be blessed with living into the beatitudes that bring about a “A New Creation”.