

A ruler from Bethlehem

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Micah 2-5a; Luke 1.47-55

Introduction

How deeply embedded in the Christmas story is Micah 5 that we have read today; Bethlehem, birthplace of David, and best captured in the carol “O little town of Bethlehem.”

But who is Micah and what is he on about?

Micah was rural man from the village of Moresheth in Judah. Micah, like Isaiah, and round about the same time, 8th century BCE, observed what was going on around him. He observed that many people were playing fast and loose with God and God's covenant.

He observed the injustice and oppression the rich and powerful perpetrated on the rest.

Alas for those who devise wickedness on their beds! When the morning dawns they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them: houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (2.1-2)

Prophets were corrupt and self serving.

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths.” (3.5)

Money corrupts the elites, producing commercial malpractice and religious obsequiousness.

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, ‘Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.’ Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, ‘Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.’

He is also well aware of the rising hegemony and military might of the superpower of the region, Assyria. What a terrifying lot they were.

High on his list was the corruption of worship, a turning of worship into manipulation; a view that God did not care one bit about the rightness of human relationships, but was only interested in religion. They thought God was religious, a view not encouraged by the prophets.

‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ 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?

Micah has spoken strong words of judgment on the way the people and their elites have behaved. It's not a subject we like to talk about much. But not to judge such a corrupt view is to condone it. That was their mistake. They lived as though they could manipulate God: God was open to corruption. Pay God off with religion and the poor could suffer injustice and violence. Who cared?

Micah's Promise of reversal

Micah has a different view of God' God is the God of reversals. God turns things upside down' God is the creator who can turn things inside out' So hope arises out of devastation' Suffering embodies salvation. Advent is the celebration of this divine irony. Specifically, Micah sees a new ruler coming' Surprisingly' but in keeping with the divine sense of irony' this new ruler will arise from one of the least of the clans of Judah' While the reference to Bethlehem evokes thoughts of King David he is not mentioned and neither is the word for king and messiah' What Micah wants to make clear is the new ruler would be one whose reign will be consistent with that of God' the ancient of days'

Micah's Promise of a new ruler

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord his God, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

The new ruler would be a majestic figure. Once again we find the language of 'shepherd' dominating the picture' Protection and care, so little exercised in the Israel of Micah's day, would characterise his rule. Those characteristics would find their best expression in justice, in the elimination of corruption, in the setting to rights of all that is wrong and the elimination of violence against the least.

Security and peace, non-existent in Micah's day, and fragile in ours, further characterise the kingship of reversal.

And 700 hundred years later we have Mary's response

And not much has changed. The cast of characters has, but not the problem.

Her main theme is God's promise of salvation for the poor and the oppressed. The good news is, everything has changed. God's shepherd king is coming. God is acting.

That salvation is the source of praise and worship; this hymn is a prime example of such praise. The hymn links the coming salvation in Jesus, which is the main story in Luke with the dreams and hopes of the pious; scripture reading Judaism of second temple period, people who read Micah.

The salvation of the poor and oppressed begins with Mary herself who becomes God's servant, a lowly person, very young and very vulnerable in a violent world in which women and children were at the bottom of the social pile.

God's irony again; God does not choose the famous, the powerful or the celebrated because they have too much social baggage to be of much use. God simply requires that his word of promise be trusted and his right to rule be acknowledged. He uses his might and strong arm for the liberation of the poor because he is holy (Psalm 111.9; Psalm 89.10, 13).

God replaces the ruling power elites by lifting up the lowly, the rich lose their security and the hungry find satisfaction in the good things that He has to offer (51- 53). The world's social order is reversed or at least that is the plan. This is a provocative and not in the least a conservative vision of God's will.

But the key to Mary's vision is that God is fulfilling his promises to Israel (54-55). Everything that is about to happen is in pursuance of God's ancient unswerving commitment to Abraham that through him God would bless all the nations (Genesis 7.6-8, 18.18, 22.17).

This also includes the promise made to David (2 Samuel 7). God's work in John and Jesus cannot be separated from these ancient promises. God's purpose has always been to bless the world with peace, love justice and truthfulness. Now is the time.

Notice how Mary speaks not of God's future action but of God's present. The announcement of the births of John and Jesus are the context for the prophetic announcement that God is working now in the midst of the present mess of deceit, violence and coercion. This prophetic language privileges the present, neither longing for a past golden age nor reserving all hope for the future. When God speaks, God acts. Such is the confidence of faith grounded in hope.

God is at work in individual lives like Mary's and in the social order to subvert the structure of society that supports and perpetuates such distinctions.

Did you notice, not one word about revenge or violence. The only prayer is that God would come; come Lord, come and all manner of things will be well.

Conclusion

As we move from Advent to Christmas we need to use the season to learn to see the divine action where it is least expected.

We also need to learn that during Advent and Christmas we are worshipping a Lord who affronts the unjust, the violent, and the corrupt use of power.

We need to learn most from the prophet and Mary that God will not be manipulated to approve our involvement in any of the above through religion. Only a trust that lives justice, covenant love and a humble heart truly matter. Salvation must live in and through us.