

SERMON for Epiphany 4 - February 2nd, 2020.

Readings: Micah 6: 1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31; Matthew 5: 1-12.

The readings for today can be looked at two ways. They either have a lot to say about what is expected of us or they can act as a sort of road map, as we seek to live our lives as followers of Christ.

Some years ago, the favourite catch-phrase of many looking for guidance in their lives would be: "What would Jesus do" and, even now, you occasionally see this shortened to WWJD, in fact in some Christian book shops, you can still buy bracelets etc. with the letters WWJD on them. But, rather than that question, is the one which the prophet Micah raises in our first reading today: "What does the Lord require of you?"

Micah is writing around 720-740 BCE, at a time of great uncertainty, with the northern kingdom of Israel having disappeared and great empires rising and falling all around them. The main points of Micah's message concern the plight of the poor in his country and the way they are treated by those with power and influences.

Verse 8 is one of my favourite Old Testament passages, and one of the ones which has had the most influence on my life:

"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?"

This is how God wants us to lead our lives: To work for and do justice - to see that justice is done wherever it is in our power to do it, and to speak out and influence where we can.

To love kindness - to be gentle, caring, and compassionate towards those around us.

To walk humbly with your God - to love God and to seek to deepen our relationship with God and to know and acknowledge that all that we are and all that we have comes from God.

Our Psalm asks the question: who may come close to God. The answer for many of us may be a bit confronting as we blunder our way through life:

- those who walk blamelessly, do what is right and speak the truth from the heart.
- those who do not slander, nor do evil, nor reproach their neighbours
- those who despise the wicked, who honour those who fear God, who stand by their promises no matter what
- those who lend without interest, who do not take a bribe.

In other words, a call to live with honesty, integrity and generosity.

In our Epistle reading, Paul talks about God's wisdom and power in Christ – that the foolishness of God is wiser than any human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Then Paul exhorts us to consider our own calling and picks up something of what I talked about last week – that most of Christ's disciples then, and now, are ordinary folk – without super wisdom, with neither great power nor the privileges that come with which family or where we were born.

Why?

... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God. [1 Cor 1: 27-29]

Finally, let's look at what the Gospel may have in store for us today. The beautiful, confusing piece of scripture known as the Beatitudes.

As we know, Jesus lived in a country that had been invaded by the all-powerful Roman Empire. The country was run by a combination of corrupt local representation and brutal Roman overseers and was held together by an army of occupation.

As Jesus led his disciples up a mountain to give them some teaching, the crowds which were drawn to him wherever he went, came and listened, hungry for something that would give them hope, some meaning to their lives.

I love this passage. At a surface reading it seems to be full of contradictions, but I remember being told years ago, that The Beatitudes are a blueprint of how to live a Christian life. That we should have this pinned up everywhere to remind ourselves, and at one point, the parish I was in, did just that and put copies of the Beatitudes all-round the place!

I remember some years ago, one of the discussions which went on in my email group, was that perhaps rather than this being a teaching time, Jesus is actually commenting to the disciples about the despair he sees in the faces of the crowds that are surrounding them, the way people are coping with the difficulties their lives throw up.

It is like Jesus is saying, yes, I know you live difficult lives, I know things are tough, but because you try to make the best of these difficulties and live good and righteous lives, God will so bless you.

The Message has an interesting slant on this passage:

³“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

⁴“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

⁵“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

⁶“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

⁷“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘careful,’ you find yourselves cared for.

⁸“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

⁹“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

¹⁰“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

¹¹“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. ¹²You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, / do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Last Sunday we celebrated Australia Day, and we gave thanks for the many blessings we have received, having the privilege to live in this beautiful country, safe, and in the eyes of most of the world, rich beyond imagining. I suggested then, that while we celebrate and give thanks for those blessings, we must not be complacent and “sit back on our laurels”, we have still a long way to go to make this place the “Great Southland of the Holy Spirit”!

If we live our lives, however, with today’s readings foremost in our hearts, we go a long way to living the life we have been called to live, and we will have the resources to deal with the hardships which come our way.

So, in the words of the prophet Micah: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Amen.

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2 February, 2020.