

Sermon preached by Trevor on Sunday 5th November 2017

Micah 3.5-12 (4 before Advent 2017)

I thought I would begin this morning by reading for you the few verses which immediately precede those in our Old Testament reading. So, this is Micah 3.1-4:

And I said: 'Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron'. Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly.

As imagery goes, this is strong stuff! If there were a TV version of it, it would almost certainly be aired after 9pm, deemed unsuitable for viewing by children and adults of a nervous disposition. It's not for the squeamish, and perhaps that's why the compilers of the lectionary chose to omit these verses from today's reading, not wanting to spoil our appetite for Sunday lunch with the biblical equivalent of a video nasty.

But this horrific image – of the rulers and leaders of God's people butchering those under their care, flaying their skin, chopping them into bite sized chunks, and having them served up, bones and all, in a delicious stew – is *meant* to shock, and that sense of shock provides the context for the rest of the passage. Without it, we may wonder what all the fuss is about.

Micah, a prophet about whom we know very little, is confronting those in power, those with influence, those who call the shots in the nation's life and so hold the people's well-being in their hands, and calling them out. And he does it with this grotesque image of a macabre culinary event. *This*, he says, *this* is what your leadership, your rule, your shepherding and care for the people really amounts to. You, who above all should know justice and dispense it for the nation's well-being, in reality hate the good and love the evil. And you are chewing the people up and spitting them out, lubricating your misrule with their blood, tearing them apart for personal gain, and, worse still, covering it all up with a tissue of lies and official proclamations pretending it is all otherwise.

So, Micah's target is injustice and corruption on the part of those vested with positions of trust and responsibility. But it is also a word spoken against what I suppose these days would be called 'post-truth', or 'alternative facts', spinning the reality of things so that it is conveniently lost behind a respectable and widely accepted version of things. And Micah's fleeting resort to the genre of gothic horror is a way of lifting the lid, peering behind the screen, contradicting the official version of events and showing things as they really are. We don't need to dwell too long on all this – power, corruption, alternative facts – to see how

this text from 800 years or so before the birth of Christ is absolutely contemporary in its force and applicability.

But it's not just political leaders whom Micah has in his sights. The religious leaders of the day are smack bang in the middle of it all – up to their necks in it in fact. So, in verse 5, Micah turns on prophets who lead God's people astray, proclaiming 'Peace' – all is well – when in reality all is far from well. And they do it, Micah suggests, to get their nose in the trough and to keep it there. These are almost certainly court prophets, officials whose role (in an age where political and religious life was all mixed up together) would be to hang around the throne rooms and cabinet tables of power, and, when important decisions were to be made, to discern and proclaim God's will. In other words, they were on the payroll of government, and would no doubt benefit considerably from offering spiritual advice *favourable* to whatever the current piece of policy was. As every dog knows, you don't bite the hand that feeds you unless you want to go hungry. And, Micah indicates, whenever the juicy treats continued to be dropped from the tables of wealth and power, these prophets were going to say what their paymasters wanted to hear. Corruption, and falsehood.

And what was their message? Micah sums it up in a single word, but a word bursting at the seams with religious, political and economic meaning. 'Peace'. *Shalom*. As we've seen before in the Bible, 'peace' doesn't mean anything so thin and tasteless as the absence of conflict between people or nations. It's much richer than that. It connotes a positive state in which everything in life is as it should be, as it was intended to be – no violence, to be sure; but no injustice, no corruption, no disease – but total 'well-being'. And 'peace' of this sort is precisely the condition God promises his people, and which he longs to see realized or approximated to in their lives. It is a characteristic of the Kingdom of God, and one to which, when we glimpse it or taste it, brings us joy. And this God-intended, God-promised, God-oriented vision of human flourishing is what these false prophets appeal to in representing the 'state of the nation'. This is the official religious 'spin': all is well, all is as God intended. It's the ultimate oracle of well-being, the word of divine sanction and blessing on those in power. Perhaps, like so many peddlers of political spin and press-releases, they have come to believe their own publicity, distanced from the reality of things by endless immersion in the bubble of power-play. So, says Micah, towards the end of the passage we read together, there's bribery and corruption all over the place, but those who are complicit in it 'lean on the Lord and say "Surely the Lord is with us!"'. Peace. All is well.

It's not just falsehood; it's more or less blasphemous, so far removed is it from the reality of things. And so far removed is the political and economic reality of things from everything that the promise of God's peace really stands for and implies. Peace. All is well. Oh no, says Micah. No it's not! You flay the skin off my people. You tear the flesh from their bones, and chop them up like meat in a cooking pot, for your own greedy consumption.

Micah's not on anyone's payroll. Not in anyone's pocket. And those of us who happen to find ourselves, if not exactly supping at the tables of power and providing religious favours in exchange, nonetheless *paid* to teach and preach the Word of the Lord, ought probably not to hear this text as interested observers, understanding its invective as directed at someone else, but realize that in some way we are among those who are Micah's chief suspects, and reckon with the implications of that.

Otherwise, I suppose it's easy enough for most of us to think that Micah's aim is levelled at someone else. Those in power. Our leaders. Those who govern, whose positions of responsibility involve them daily in decisions and actions that affect the lives of everyone, for better or for ill. Who can certainly be motivated by concern for the common good; but who can also allow more personal and selfish concerns to affect their policy making, and for whom the possibilities of corruption and massive personal gain are more real than they will be for the rest of us. This is certainly a text aimed at anyone in that circumstance.

But don't think that lets the rest of us off the hook, because it seems to me that it doesn't. After all, in a democratic country like our own, the behavior of those in power is something we are all complicit in to some extent, and we can't wash our hands of them when their personal or political behavior is one we disapprove of, or even manifestly unjust and corrupt. We may or may not have cast our vote in the relevant box, but we can all involve ourselves in processes designed to hold them to account, or to effect the changes we believe are necessary. And at the very least, like Micah, we can speak out, speaking truth to power when it seems needful to do so; confronting 'alternative facts' with visions that lift the lid on reality. We may not be heard or listened to. It's not clear that Micah was in his day, or that his word of judgment would have been taken seriously by anyone. But he spoke up. And so should we.

Perhaps, too, Micah should encourage us, as Christians, to take a closer interest in those who we elect to political office, or even those we appoint to positions of leadership in the church, recognizing the considerable responsibilities they bear, the cost of bearing those responsibilities, and the endless opportunities that those bring for conflicts of interest and for personal benefit to displace the pursuit of the common good in their priorities. At the very least, we should pray for them regularly.

Finally, though, I think all of us fall within range of Micah's judgement on the political and religious leaders of his day. Of course we are not all leaders, and some of us may suppose that we are never going to be in a position to wrestle with decisions that will have a powerful impact on other people, good, bad or indifferent. Not having to deal with such things, we may like to think, is precisely why we elect or appoint leaders at all, and exactly what we pay them for! But to suppose that is to let ourselves off the hook rather too easily. After all, we all do things and make choices that have knock-on effects on other people all the time, even though we aren't directly aware of them. It might be something as simple as smiling at someone in the street, or responding sharply and unkindly to someone in a meeting, or offering a word of encouragement to someone, or showing someone some needless act of kindness. All those things and many more will, without our thinking about it, have an impact of which we will probably be and remain unaware, and which might be far more significant and far-reaching than we would ever suppose. Our choices, our actions, our reactions ripple out beyond ourselves and modify the feelings, the thinking, the behavior of others, and others in their turn, and others in their turn. Our lives are connected with those of others, and like a spider's web, the smallest motion on our part can set the whole network jangling.

More obviously, of course, any of us in possession of a disposable income (which means all of us, no matter how small or large that income might be) will, by the way in which we choose to dispose of it – by exercising our ‘spending power’, which is precisely power, a force with impact on others – *have* an impact on others; some close at hand, some much more remote. And sometimes the impact is good and healthy; and sometimes it is bad and damaging, for reasons far beyond the immediate reach of our transaction at Morrisons or Marks and Spencer or wherever it may be, but ones to which that transaction is nonetheless directly linked.

In all these and in a host of other ways, we are not isolated from the things which either enhance or detract from the well-being of others, the common good, the approximation in human life to that peace of God which passes all understanding but which is the substance both of God’s promise and of our hope. More or less *everything we do* makes a difference at some level, either bringing such peace closer to realization, or pushing it farther away. And we bear responsibility, therefore, for the well-being of those whom our actions will affect, for reckoning with the differences our actions will make, and for doing whatever we can day in and day out, no matter how small, to make differences which make for peace and well-being, rather than inflicting hurts or injustices, or propping up unjust and inequitable structures.

I guess in some ways that’s a daunting thing to be reminded of. But in other ways it’s reassuring – that we are not powerless, but can be involved in making a difference, in bringing into the lives of those around us and those far flung from us a chink of light rather than darkness, a glimpse of goodness rather than wickedness, a foretaste, no matter how small, of the kingdom banquet to which all are invited, rather than the foul stench of Micah’s human stew...