

Sermon 23 December 2018

Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:39-45

The world of Micah, a prophet, was a world caught in the wilderness of violence, uncertainty and economic disruption – ring any bells?

We too experience terror and fragility on international, national and personal levels, ranging from Presidents at odds with the rest of his government; through errant drone operators; to our own reasons for needing peace and hope.

We seek hope that the world will be different and that this year/next year will be the year for security and peace.

That was exactly what the people of Israel were facing in Micah's time, the time of Isaiah and Amos. Both Israel and Judah were under threat of attack and invasion. The great cities of these countries, which are supposed to be places of holiness and faithfulness have become evil and immoral, the leaders abusing their power, being cruel and murderous and corrupt. And where they lead, the people follow.

Micah is a prophet, his job is to be a person of truth, to speak the truth that God has revealed to him, both good and bad. Prophets played a significant part in the life of Israel, calling attention to the need to turn again to God, to call for justice, to call for salvation, to be signposts to a Messiah.

The book of Micah, towards the end of the Old Testament is short, moving from warnings of punishment through to a beacon of hope of a new king.

Micah says there will come a time when God's chosen king will take care of his people and one day there will be peace. Micah's prophecy is one of a future hope. Hope is something that can be easily wounded, but it very hard to kill. Hope lasts and lasts. It enables us to feel secure about the future, such that we can live with the uncertainty of today for it makes that uncertainty more secure.

Micah's message is for all people, it is universal, people from all nations will come to worship (4:2) It is inclusive, the outcast, the lame, the grieving will all find a welcome (4:7). There will be peace (4:3-4). The Hebrew word for 'peace' in this context is more than just an absence of war, it means wholeness and rest. The sort of peace that Mark was encouraging us to think about last week.

And this universal hopeful place will be ruled by a mighty king (5:4) who will be a shepherd to his people.

I think I've told you before the story of a village in modern day Palestine where an army captain had all the sheep rounded up and placed in a common pen. All these sheep had different shepherds and to the eyes of both the army captain and the shepherds, the sheep now all looked the same. Impossible to distinguish which sheep belonged to which shepherd. The army captain was going to kill the sheep when one boy said that if he could separate his flock from the others then could he keep them? The army captain thought he was on to a sure fire thing and rashly said they all have their sheep back if they could do that. Well, the boy went to the entrance to the pen. He stood still, he didn't try to separate out any specific sheep, instead he started to sing. And one by one

gradually out of the mass of the sheep, his own flock congregated around him and he led them away. Each shepherd to able to do the same thing. The sheep recognised the song of its shepherd.

Maybe the people of God, will recognise the song of the shepherd king foretold by Micah.

A consistent theme in the Bible is that God delights in upsetting human expectations. Think of Sarah and Elisabeth who had children in old age and of David, who was the youngest and smallest of the brothers and yet was anointed King.

The ruler promised by Micah will come in an unexpected way, from an unexpected town – Bethlehem. The short reading from Luke’s gospel unexpectedly takes two women, one older than she would have hoped and another rather younger than she would have expected, both having children, and it places them centre stage. They are both visited by the Holy Spirit. God speaks through them. He causes the unborn John the Baptist to recognise the unborn Jesus. He reveals to Elisabeth that Mary is both pregnant and pregnant with the Lord. Elisabeth shouts out with praise and joy and Mary responds with song. Underneath it all is a celebration of God. God has taken the initiative – the Lord, the Saviour, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Merciful One, the Faithful One - all summed up in Elisabeth’s response to seeing Mary.

The prophetic writings of the Hebrew scriptures will have been known to Elisabeth and to Mary. They know of the writings promising mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution and victory over evil. Their two sons, boys yet to be born, yet already named by God, will become the agents of God’s long promised revolution, one the messenger and the other the king himself, Jesus.

The promise of Micah invites us to look for God’s presence where we least expect it, to be attuned to the small, the powerless and the vulnerable. To know that God’s promise is certain but that the way it is worked out is not always predictable.

There are other, perhaps more familiar, words in Micah (6:8) which we use in one of the confessions – what does the Lord require of you? To do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord your God.

They resonate with words in the final hymn today, Tell out my Soul, which claims that ‘proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight, the hungry fed, the humble lifted high. For firm is God’s promise and his mercies sure’.

This Advent, this Christmas, may we have hope, hope of peace, courage to look for justice, and may we recognise the song of our shepherd king.

Bishop Viv’s Christmas message includes this: ‘Our whole country now needs a new vision of hope, it needs determined work alongside those who are poor, it needs the hard graft of reconciliation. It will take courage to reach out to each other with the offer of peace and hope. The courage of Mary when God reached out to her.....’.

Sarah Thomas 23 December 2018