Sermon for 31st in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Micah 3:5-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18 (personal choice); Matthew 23:1-12

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Micah, along with his contemporary Isaiah of Jerusalem, lived in worrying times. They both saw the dark clouds of political storms gathering in the north that might break any moment and destroy their small state of Judah in the south and their larger northern Jewish neighbour, Israel.

From the perspective of a Jewish prophet, Micah interprets the problem not just as a military or political one, but also and chiefly as a religious and moral one.

Assyria may have been a brutal, militaristic state threatening southern expansion towards Israel and Judah, but for Micah the root cause is the religious and moral decline of the Jewish people. Assyria just happens to be God’s chosen instrument of punishment.

Micah accuses Israel and Judah of building their societies on murder and injustice. Those who have food to eat call for peace, and put down those that are rebelling because they are starving. Such injustice will result in Jerusalem becoming “a ploughed field” – destroyed beyond repair.

This is the power of the bible – it speaks across the ages and cultures into our lives today in so many different and penetrating ways. Recent decades of globalisation conducted by an oligarchy of super-wealthy politicians and corporate and banking elite have enriched the top few percent of the world at the cost of the majority, who have seen wages stagnate, jobs shipped to one cheap labour source to the next, and whose small lives have been patronised and ignored for too long. The world is in the grip of a political and social revolution; as I write it is without major world conflict, but world peace is not guaranteed.

Many countries are in the grip of mass unemployment, particularly among the young, endemic corruption and ever-widening inequality between the top elite and the general population. Brexit, Trump, anti-establishment, these are the *mots du jour.*

When secularists write their history books they are content to write that the fall of the Roman Empire was partly due to decadence and moral decay, or that despotic left-wing or right-wing regimes were brought down by their internal moral contradictions. Churchgoers are content to hear of Israel or Judah getting their comeuppance for their religious and moral failures, but we are all far less willing to accept the possibility that our own society is in danger due to the moral delinquency of our generations.

Micah challenges us to ask ourselves with brutal honesty if ever anything like that could happen to us. Just how secure are the moral foundations which uphold the stability of our society?

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I have chosen a reading from 1Thessalonians 4:9-18 as an example of a Christian group facing a terrifying apocalypse – at least that is what they believed at the time.

The first converts to the new Christian religion at Thessalonica were in fevered turmoil. They worried and hoped at the same time that the resurrection of Jesus meant that the end of the world was imminent. They were in a very vulnerable position in those early days of living with a new concept of reality which believing in Christ entails.

Mentally deranged or capricious religious leaders often exploit such vulnerable and easily persuaded new comers. Paul does not. Paul says:

* Calm down, just get on and live a normal, quiet life
* Do not stir up public panic
* Work hard for yourselves and your families, do not give up work and wait for the apocalypse to arrive, as some had done (2 Thessalonians 3)

In times of national and global crisis, it is not the Church’s role to fan the flames of uncertainty and panic. Christians benefit as much as everyone else from a stable, peaceful and orderly society.

On the other hand, Paul does not deny the reality of a coming judgement just to maintain a quiet life. At this stage of his ministry, and Thessalonians represents Paul’s earliest thinking, Paul himself seems to have assumed the Day of Judgement was imminent. We see from St Luke’s gospel and Acts of the Apostles that Paul and his fellow apostles later develop an understanding that the age of the Church must come before any Day of Judgement so that the world has chance to hear the gospel and respond.

Talk of Judgement Day has now largely been left to the lunatic fringe; the whole concept has been so undermined by the religious crazies who have denounced all and sundry and gone to the hills in anticipation of the best seats in the house from which they can gleefully watch the rest of humanity get their just desserts.

It is not socially acceptable in comfortable western societies to speak in such atavistic terms, laden as they are with such colourful and fantastic imagery of beasts and devils and fire and sulphur. But in throwing out the old literalist understandings, many have let go of Judgement altogether.

That may be a mistake, especially if God does still care for the oppressed, exploited, tortured and marginalised. The Church’s role is not to drop the inconvenient truths of the bible because they are unpopular, but to find a new language with which to convey them.

iii

Many Christians may have given up on the idea of Judgement because they do not find such concepts sit well with modern secular attitudes, but other Christians may still retain a belief in a demythologised Judgement Day on the grounds that they do believe God still cares about the effects of evil and sin, but they are frightened of speaking about such things for fear of appearing like the self-righteous bands who run to the hills in eager anticipation every few months, or turn into self-serving hypocrites such as the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-12.

Where Jesus saw sheep without a shepherd, the Pharisees saw an opportunity for disdain and self-righteousness. The danger of self-righteousness has haunted religious belief, Christianity included, from Adam and Eve to the present day. It is a constant danger which is responsible for turning many people away from the truth and love of Christ.

The Jewish world was bubbling away with discontent in Jesus’ day. Many were searching for a new sense of hope and purpose. Many were eager to run after new religious movements, some highly demanding and austere like the Essenes or like John the Baptist, others highly political like the zealot party or Judas the Galilean or Theudas (Acts 5:36-37), others highly pietistic like the Pharisees.

There were a lot of vulnerable people being stirred up to voice their discontent. Many were poor, exploited by the rich of their own nation as well as by the restrictions and financial demands laid upon them by the imperial regulations from Rome.

If the people ran to the zealots, as increasingly they did in the first few decades of the Christian era, they were being incited into a futile and bloody rebellion against Rome which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the mass suicide of Masada.

If they ran to the Essenes, they were effectively leaving the world behind to live celibate, ascetic, communal lives dedicated to study and prayer, but disengaged from the general cut and thrust of family and society.

If they ran to the Pharisees they would find a very high price of entry there too. Many would be considered unclean and unworthy. Most ordinary people living everyday lives could not hope to keep the minutiae of the Law as interpreted by the Pharisees. If you were already a member you had the comfort of believing you were the only ones truly keeping the Law and could feel superior to the majority of society around you, but most people had no hope of finding spiritual comfort among the Pharisees. They would face disdain and condemnation.

Only by running to Jesus would poor but repentant sinners find a ready acceptance. Jesus welcomed those rejected by the Pharisees and unable to face the demands of the Essenes and of the wrong social class to be embraced by the Sadducees. Prostitutes, tax collectors, fishermen, shepherds, soldiers – all were equally welcomed by Jesus, including even Samaritans and lepers.

In one sense Jesus interpreted religious duty as simply as possible: love God and love your neighbour. Yet in another sense, these commands are the most profound of all. Only grace makes any of us right with God in the light of the truly absolute demands of love. But everyone who wishes to live according to these precepts is welcome to join Jesus and his band of people, the Church.

In today’s world which once again is fomenting with unrest, discontent and anxiously casting around for hope – some are running to strong government such as that offered by President Putin and his increasing number of admirers across the world. Our challenge is how welcoming they would find the Church? Are we like Jesus, or have we turned into Pharisees ourselves? Upon that will Judgement Day pronounce.

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