

## Epiphany 4 – St Aidan’s and Wesley Uniting – 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2014

Theme: “What does the Lord require of us?”

Readings: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

### Introduction

Much like last Sunday we have two readings that build on each other. This week however, it is Jesus who builds on Old Testament teaching of one of the prophets, Micah, who challenges the people, both as a nation Israel, and as individuals, to look at what the Lord requires of them. Then in the Gospel we have the beginning of Jesus’ teaching which adds to and in some ways answers the Hebrew Scriptures question more fully. Let us look at both passages and then see their relevance for us today.

### Micah 6:1-8

This passage depicts a courtroom scene in which the Lord lodges a legal case against Israel for not following the ways of Yahweh, their God. The first to speak in this section, in verses 1-2 and verse 8, is the prophet functioning as the narrator. The injured plaintiff is God who speaks in verses 3-5. Israel, the defendant, speaks in verses 6 and 7. The pictorial images of the judges are the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth, representing God’s world at large.

A fascinating way for the writers of old to bring before the so called ‘people of God’ charges that they are not fulfilling their covenant responsibilities, initially as a nation, and then personalised in verse 8b – “And what does the Lord require of you?” So often we pick a verse out from Scripture, apply it to a situation, and fail to see how and why it is used.

Micah prophesied sometime between 750 and 686BC and predicted the fall of Samaria, the Northern Kingdom that fell to the Assyrians in 732 BC. Micah was scathing of alliances with other nations rather than trusting in their God, Yahweh.

In this passage we have the call:

- To act justly or with justice
- To love mercy
- To walk humbly with your God

Here we are called to be a voice for oppressed person, widows, refugees, asylum seekers, Australia’s first peoples, to fight for the rights of those who are trodden over by our system, not able to fend for themselves.

God wants us to love kindness. The Hebrew word is ‘hesed’ meaning God’s loving kindness. We respond to God’s love by sharing it with others. We are to walk ‘humbly with our God’ listening for God’s voice amongst the many and varied voices within our society. Not an easy task in our pluralistic society with the many competing voices. Yet here is fundamental teaching from within the Hebrew Scriptures that goes ‘hand in hand’ with Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes.

“And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:9

Many within the Jewish and the Christian faiths have found these words central in their spiritual journeying. They align with the simple call of Jesus to the first disciples last Sunday: “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men or people.”

### Matthew 5:1-12

And now some thoughts on the 'beatitudes'. The first two verses are the setting for Jesus' teaching which is more complex than might first appear. Jesus sees the crowd, goes up the mountain and sits down – thereby he is teaching from a position of height, which on a mountain was seen as authority and being seated was the teaching posture of a rabbi. He doesn't retreat from the crowds but probably finds a place where his voice can be heard by many. Matthew records that the people hang onto every word he says in this section in chapter 7:28 “.. the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” However, it appears that the primary group being taught are his disciples, who come near and form an inner circle, so to speak. Today's reading is but the beginning of what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount covering Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7.

It is the first part of the sermon here in verses 3-12 of chapter 5 that is known as the Beatitudes because of the repeated word 'blessed' sometimes translated as 'happy'. The Latin for blessed is 'beati' which is where we get the word 'beatitude' from. There are eight beatitudes which indicate God's favour towards certain types of people. The last two in verses 11 & 12 which concern persecution are counted as one.

1. The first beatitude blesses the 'poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (vs 3). The kingdom of heaven refers to God's reign, rather than a place. The 'poor in spirit' are those who struggle with faith, with life and don't seem to cope all that well. This is a 'shot' at the powerful, the assured in their faith who are overpowering those who are struggling both spiritually and physically.
2. The second beatitude is 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (vs 4). Again, there is the juxtaposition against those who haven't experienced what loss is all about compared to those who continue to grieve, whether it be for those close to them who have died, for broken relationships or faith broken by the actions of others.
3. Thirdly, 'Blessed are the meek who will inherit the earth'. (vs 5) Jesus himself exemplifies the attitude of the meek, the humble who care for others. These will be the winners spiritually not the strong and powerful.
4. The fourth beatitude is 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.' (vs 6) This righteousness is two-fold. Being in a right relationship with God and with those around you. In this way you are filled with joy, hope and peace which comes from your right relationships.
5. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy'. (vs 7) Here Jesus teaches that those who are shown mercy by God should also practice that mercy, that love, that care to and for others. A practical outworking of our faith.
6. The sixth beatitude is 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God'. (vs 8) This imagery is for those who struggle with the legalistic, outward purity being required by the priests and religious leaders but whose lives are anything but pure. The simple, faithful souls are those exalted by Christ.
7. 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons and daughters of God'. (vs 9) The setting of this was over against the so called Roman peace that subjugated those to be under its authority. The peace here is not only the 'shalom', wanting the best for the other but also God's reign where no longer there is the military rule.
8. Finally there is the couplet relating to persecution and personal insult in verses 10 and 11. This was a past, present and future issue that Jesus knew the disciples would live with, as had the prophets of old, as would the church through its history.

### Conclusion

In the two passages today, we are confronted by life choices we are to make about our faith journeying. Neither passages are prescriptive about exactly how to make our faith choices but give opportunity to reflect on how we live our lives, in the world, yet retain faith integrity.

In Robert Frost's famous poem 'The Road Not Taken' he writes of the choice that lay before him, and indeed before all of us.

Let me finish with it:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth .....  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference."

Amen