



**KIAMA ANGLICAN
CHURCHES**

A Promise of Justice

Sermon – Marc McLaren

18 & 25 September 2022

Bible readings: Micah 3:1-12, John 2:13-22,
James 5:1-6

Micah begins with an extremely blunt message to the leaders of Israel.

There are no excuses, you are meant to know the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Instead, you do the absolute opposite; you hate what is good and love what is evil. Micah points out that the leaders are infatuated with their own self-serving interests and the injustices that follow.

When God critiques the leaders, God is speaking directly about the political, civic and religious leaders of Israel, including the king.

In the first chapter, Micah expresses God's deep grief and sorrow over Israel's opposition, rebellion and idolatry, the false worship of other gods and preoccupation with their sins.

Micah asks the accountability question, who is to blame for Israel's rebellion?

The answer comes back squarely in verse 5, **"Samaria, it's capital city!"**

What is at the centre of both capital cities?

Kim explained in the first chapter of Micah that the centre of the cities are the political, civic and religious leaders. They are the ones who were seen to be facilitating and supporting this opposition, rebellion and false worship. They were the ones leading God's people away from God's covenant relationship – "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

This prompts the second damning question, **"Where is the centre of idolatry in Judah?"** The confronting answer comes back, **"Jerusalem, its capital!"**

What is at the centre of Jerusalem? It is the temple, from where God promises to dwell and lead and from where God's priests and prophets promise to serve the people.

At the time of Micah's dire prophecies, Israel was experiencing great economic prosperity and all should have been well. Instead, it was a time when the leadership were more focused on promoting and protecting their own self-interests rather than championing justice and mercy and advocating for the poor and marginalised.

Steve quoted Baron Lord Acton (1834-1902), **“power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”** Steve went on to say. **“The drive for power forces you to cover/conceal what you covet.”**

Steve also quoted Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, **“My work with the poor and incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.”**

Steve spoke about the powerful in Jerusalem in Micah 2, lying awake at night scheming how they could take for themselves the fields and the homes of the poor and vulnerable.

God's response to these injustices is not one of silence or indifference but one of certain judgment.

God's judgement was in response to their 'iniquity'. Steve explained that the Hebrew word for 'iniquity' is 'Avon', which can be translated as 'crooked behaviour', a behaviour that drives corruption and injustice.

Kim explained from Micah 1, **“God is coming to visit, and it’s not going to be pretty. Everyone is going to hear about it. The mountains are going to melt beneath him, and the valleys split apart like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope.”**

And a spoiler alert about God’s judgement - please cover your ears if you don’t want to hear the final chapter of the story.

The northern kingdom of Israel is subsequently conquered by the Assyrians, and the people are sent into exile. While the southern kingdom of Judah was devastated by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, with Jerusalem being spared at the last minute, only to be subsequently defeated and exiled by the Babylonians. I’ll come back to this point later.

So what is God’s response to these injustices and pending judgement? In verse 8...

I will mourn and lament. I will walk around barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl...

God continues in verse 9...

...for my people’s wound is too deep to heal.

So we return to Micah 3:1-2...

Listen, you leaders of Israel! You are supposed to know right from wrong, but you are the very ones who hate good and love evil.

So what do these leaders do? They engage in shocking acts of cannibalism! Metaphorically speaking, they are skinning people alive, tearing the flesh from their bones, breaking their bones and then eating their flesh. Micah

goes one step further, again drawing on another metaphor, you chop my people up like meat for the crockpot!

This is where the injustice of the religious, political and civic leaders leads to the annihilation of God's people! God is painting a visual picture of what injustice looks like from his perspective.

Then Micah calls out the absurd behaviour of the leaders in verse 4,

When you are in trouble, you beg for help, expecting him to answer.

Micah states, because of all the evil you have done, God won't just not listen or respond, he won't even look at you!

Micah then turns to the second dire warning. God calls the prophets out, the ones who are meant to speak God's messages, but instead are acting as false prophets, intentionally leading God's people astray.

These prophets were supposed to be trusted as the voice of God to his people.

Why have the prophets resorted to distorting the message? It's not that God has ceased speaking, and the prophets are filling in the gaps. It is because the prophets are governed not by God but by profiteering from the messages they provide. Micah says in verse 5,

You promise peace for those who give you food, but you declare war on those who refuse to feed you.

God's response to the false prophets - the night will close around you, darkness will cover you, the sun will set, your day will come to an end, and you will be shamed and disgraced. The result will be no more visions and

predictions and no more answers will come from God. In others words, you will be rendered useless and you will be silenced.

Micah draws a sharp comparison between himself and the false prophets, the ones who were meant to speak the truth and call out injustice. In verse 8, Micah says,

But as for me, I am filled with power — with the Spirit of the Lord. I am filled with justice and strength to boldly declare Israel's sin and rebellion.

When Micah claims, “*I am filled with the Spirit*”, he is not talking about his call to be a prophet but rather, he is describing how he functions in his prophetic role. Micah does not speak his own words from his own imagination but is filled with powerful words from the Spirit of God. For Micah, the filling by the Spirit results in a strong sense of God’s justice and the courage to declare God’s words to others. Fear does not immobilise him, and favouritism does not guide his thinking.

In the final message, God states, because of the injustice perpetrated, he will remove Judah’s political, civic and spiritual leaders. Why? Because the leaders hate justice, twist what is right, take bribes and are literally building Jerusalem on a foundation of murder and corruption.

I mentioned earlier about Jerusalem being spared from the siege led by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. During that time, considerable construction works were undertaken on walls, storage facilities and Hezekiah’s Tunnel into the Kidron Valley. This was done without consideration for the people's welfare; they died in the course of the work, adding further injustice.

In the midst of this, King Hezekiah responds to Micah and Isaiah's powerful, persuasive messages, changing the immediate course of Judah's history. In Isaiah 37:20, the king cries out,

“Now, O Lord our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O Lord, are God.”

While ironically, the leaders and prophets assure themselves.

“No harm can come to us,” you say, “for the Lord is here among us.”

They mistakenly rely on the belief that God is present in the Temple in Jerusalem, along with all the covenant artefacts; so surely he would not destroy his own place of residence.

God reaches the final verdict because of their blatant injustices and fraudulent practices - Mount Zion will be plowed like an open field, Jerusalem will be reduced to ruins and, where the temple stands, it will be replaced by thickets.

It's easy to distance ourselves from the events that took place 1800 years ago, in a time and place very different to ours. This would be a profound misstep. If we move to the time of Jesus' ministry and shortly after, we see the same patterns of injustice and financial profiteering taking place.

In John 2:13-22, we read of Jesus just before the Jewish Passover celebration clearing out the Temple area of merchants selling cattle, sheep and doves for sacrifices and foreign money exchange dealers. Jesus orders

them to clear the Temple and to stop turning his Father's house into a marketplace. Note it was the Jewish leaders who questioned Jesus' authority to take these actions and demanded a miraculous sign to prove his credentials. Jesus replies, with a twist of irony, the thing that you think gives you licence to practice such injustices - the Temple - I will destroy and, in three days, I will raise it up again. Obviously, they missed the point - Jesus was talking about his own body and his literal resurrection.

In James 5, we discover that the rich leaders have amassed and hoarded wealth at the expense of the field workers they have cheated out of their rightful pay and, along the way, have killed innocent people in order to get ahead and prosper. The message is clear the ill-gotten wealth gained through injustices will not save you.

Let's turn the spotlight toward our moment in history and look, without fear or favour, to consider our own political and civic and religious leaders. You don't have to look hard to see the same all-pervasive injustices practised by the leaders of our times. You don't have to look hard to read of countless scandals involving our politicians and judicial leaders.

Tragically, our church structures and leaders can be observed embroiled in and perpetuating overt and covert injustices, profiteering at the expense of others. The church is not free of its own share of scandals, including such things as systemic sexual abuse, financial mismanagement, divisions and schisms, the 'othering' of others not like us, covering up domestic violence,

religious bigotry, bullying and harassment, dash for real estate, neglect of those in need, the list goes on...

Now in one sense, it's easy to put this all down to sin. There is no doubt that leaders within and outside the church are human and fall into the trap of placing themselves above or outside of God.

I want to suggest an additional consideration that does not seek to unseat sin and the need for forgiveness but rather takes a more nuanced view. Over time leaders (and maybe all of us) can subtly fall into the trap of believing more and more in a sense of entitlement and in our power to make things happen. It can run like this, especially for leaders in the church...

- I deserve this level of reward because of my position and hard work.
- My actions are justified by the fact that I am right and others are wrong.
- I need to use my power to protect my righteous actions.
- There is a danger of losing what I have rightfully gained, so I need to take steps to preserve it, even at the expense of others.
- I am now blind to how my actions create injustices and suffering for others.

So how might leaders and ourselves counteract this subtle drift of contributing to, causing or perpetuating such injustices?

It starts with encountering Jesus' grace and forgiveness, being filled with the Holy Spirit and a commitment to serving people rather than profiting at their expense. It's

about walking humbly with our God, loving mercy and doing what is right... a slight paraphrase of Micah 6:8.

Queen Elizabeth II was a leader who lived and breathed Micah 6:8.

On 21st April 1947, Princess Elizabeth, while on a tour of South Africa with her parents and younger sister, on her twenty-first birthday, made a radio speech from Cape Town. She gratefully acknowledged the goodwill extended to her on her birthday and the warmth of the South African and Rhodesian people, and she then spoke directly to those who have grown up during the war like herself. Princess Elizabeth spoke of recovery from the war by calling on the noble motto. "I serve." She then committed herself to a life of service, separate from any claim of rightful status or power. She made this remarkable pledge -

"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do; I know that your support will be unfailingly given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it."

Mark Greene, the former Executive Director of The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and author of a number of books about Queen Elizabeth II, wrote a fascinating book called *The Queen's Way*, where he looked closely at the Queen's annual Christmas addresses. The book is available online for free. He

explores the Queen's faith through her own words. He asks the question, what has motivated her and sustained her through her life and 70 years of rule? His conclusion:

Her answer can be summed up in one word: Jesus.

It is, as she testifies, Jesus' teaching that has shaped her, Jesus' example that has inspired her, and Jesus' power that has enabled her to do the job God called her to do. We can see it in her actions. The fruit of the Spirit has been rich in her: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And we hear it in her words. She has repeatedly communicated the reality of her own faith in Christ and the difference he has made to her life in a clear and winsome way, most notably in her Christmas addresses.

Two extracts go to the heart of grace and service. Her 2012 Christmas Address - *Christ as servant lies at the heart of it all:*

"This is the time of year when we remember that God sent his only son 'to serve, not to be served'. He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ."

Her 2014 Christmas Address:

"For me, the life of Christ, The Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing."

Mark Green writes with such clarity about the Jesus-led antidote to injustice in her obituary - Queen Elizabeth II, Beacon of Grace.

Sacrifice is at the heart of the gospel – Jesus giving his life for ours. And it is at the heart of our own discipleship – taking up our cross daily to follow him. But sacrifice is intertwined with service. We no longer live for ourselves but for God and others.

So as we live this new life in Christ, let's encourage each other to...

16 Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. 17 And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:16-17

Amen