

Sunday 19th July 2020, Park Road BC
Micah 6:8 (part 1 of 3)

Micah was contemporary with Isaiah and Amos. So, all at the same time there were three active prophets, listening to God, sharing the messages God had given them for the people of God. Because we read their messages bound up in a book (our Bible) where they don't even come one after the other, it is very easy to not realise that there were all saying similar things, at the same time.

The background, context, was that Israel and Judah were enjoying economic affluence but also deep spiritual decadence. Canaanite religion was extending its influence, the purity that God demanded of God's people was being eroded as the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Since statistically that's exactly what's happening in the West today, perhaps we have particular reason to pay attention to God's word to God's people through God's ancient prophets!

Micah's attention, his particular message from God, centred around the injustices of the rich, ruling class toward those who were poorer and weaker. This didn't just mean that the poor got poorer, the very injustice of these systems meant that the social fabric of Israel and Judah were being destroyed. God, in God's sovereignty, had set out what was right and just – and people had turned away from righteousness and justice in favour of amassing more and more money.

In Micah 6:1-7, the prophet makes it sound like a court case, a legal situation. He says "stand up and plead your case hear O mountains the Lord's accusation" God has a case against his people. God is bringing a charge against Israel.

We are not living in the Middle East in the 8th century BC (before Christ). But as I reflected on these words I was drawn to Psalm 51, which we'll come back to, "Create in me a pure heart and renew a right spirit within me". How can we be sure that we are living as God created and commanded us to live? How can we be sure that the Lord who is God has no case to bring against us? Can we be sure?

These early verses of Micah 6 remind the people that God had sent them great Leadership, Moses, Aaron, Miriam – by God's own grace I will refrain from making any comment on how great or otherwise our current political leadership is or is not!!

And then, in Micah 7, the prophet asks, on behalf of the people who may not know or who may have forgotten "**Exactly what is it that God wants from us?**"

The answer comes in Micah 6:8 and we're going to spend three Sundays looking at the response to the question "exactly what is it that God wants from me". This verse is considered to be one of the great statements of what a true Christian faith is. It is a statement of Old Testament ethics which make a seamless cross over into the New Testament and the life and work of Jesus. It links Christians back to the Law given to Moses, spoken by the prophets, demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus, this verse shows us through the ages that a heart response to God is required of those who would seek the grace of the Holy Spirit to live as the people of God to this day.

What is it that God expects? (i) to act justly, (ii) to love mercy, and (iii) to walk humbly with your God. Today we'll focus on "Act justly".

If I asked what you thought were the basic elements of the Christian faith I suspect that on that list would be something about Jesus and forgiveness (please speak to me soon if not!!), going to church, reading the Bible, giving to God, serving the Lord,

sharing the good news about Jesus, prayer what about “doing justice”? Does that fit into our modern thinking about true faith? It is the first of the three things God expects and requires of us here.

When we talk about justice in English we hit a little problem. In the Bible the word for justice is often used as a word for righteousness.

In English we tend to see “justice” as confirming to the standards and laws of our society.

“Righteousness” can often be seen as doing the right thing (hmm, by whose standards?), it is often seen as conforming to religious standards.

So, in English we have had a tendency to separate justice and righteousness.

God however, from beginning to end of God’s revelation to us, expects us to live according to God’s will in all areas of our life. There is no separation between righteousness and justice and it is wrong that we try and create one, or allow one to continue. This might sound old and clichéd but years ago there was a phrase “If He is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all”. If we are not living in obedience to God in all areas of life then we are not living in obedience to God.

How might it show itself in real life if someone wants to make a distinction between justice and righteousness? Someone might tithe their time and money in the church but fiddle their tax return or use a tax evasion vehicle so that they don’t have to pay for the support of schools and hospitals. Is this righteous? It might be lawful but is it justice? A person might present as such a fine, helpful, nice individual in the life of the church, then might swear and shout and be abusive in their home. Is this right before God?

Let’s see if God has given an opinion about that!

Amos 5: 21 – 24, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts: I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you brought me offerings I will not accept them or regard them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream”

I’d be mortified if God felt like that about any of our worship gatherings. Was a one off, something particular to the situation that Amos was writing into? Sorry, no ...

Psalms 51 again, King David writes that the sacrifices that had been asked of God’s people through the ages were only acceptable to God when they were accompanied by a proper, pure heart toward God.

Proverbs 21:3, To do what is right and just is more acceptable to God than sacrifice
And there are many more along those lines, giving us the same message.

James helps to point us in the right direction. James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world”

A quick look at some of the places where God has spoken and prophets have recorded what God expects, what God wants us to understand about justice and righteousness.....

Leviticus 19:36, use honest measures and weights (trade and economic justice)

Also the same message in Deuteronomy 25 and many other places

Deuteronomy 16:19, "Do not pervert justice or show partiality, do not accept bribes ... follow justice and justice alone so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving to you". It's saying that it is wrong to have one law for some and another for the rest, that both giving and accepting bribes and favours is sinful.

1 Chronicles 18:14, King David reigned over Israel doing what was just and right for all people (a good example to balance all these bad examples!)

Psalms 82:2-3, "How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless, maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed"

Isaiah 56:1, "This is what the Lord says, maintain justice and do what is right"

Jeremiah 22: 15 – 17, talking to people who were getting richer and richer while the poor became poorer and poorer, "Does it make you king to have more cedar? Your father did what was right and just so all went well with him. He defended the poor and needy, **is that not what it means to know me?**" says the Lord. I have highlighted that phrase because I think it is significant for us. I'll come back to it.

Ezekiel 45:9, "This is what the sovereign Lord says, "You have gone far enough O princes of Israel! Give up your violence and oppression. Do what is right and just" Then after speaking out against violence and oppression God speaks again about honest measures and weights.

Romans 2:13, "It is not those who hear the Law who are righteous in the sight of God, but those who obey the Law who will be declared righteous".

So, what Paul is writing in Romans echoes what Jeremiah wrote so many centuries before "**Is that not what it means to know me?** Says the Lord"

Justice, it is something we DO, a verb, not an abstract concept. It is about being honest and open. It is about reaching down to the poor, the weak, the marginalised and giving them a hand to get up. It is about the fair distribution of wealth, it is about equality and respect. Who wouldn't want to do these things? Well, too many of us it seems. Prejudice and hate are vehicles that aim to make us think of the poor and weak as if they were responsible for their own situation – it detracts from criticism of those who profit from poverty and injustice.

What about me, today? What does God require of me? To be aware of injustice and dishonesty and prejudice and to stand against it, to encourage those who work for justice – that is social justice and economic justice, hand in hand. It is political whether we like it or not. It is financial too.

"Is that not what it means to know me? Says the Lord! It makes me feel as if going to church and even making a few sacrifices might be so much easier!! What does the Lord require of me? To do justice To love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.