

Kia Ora Kotou, good morning & welcome again. My name is Kristin, & I'm one of the pastors here. In terms of ministers, well that's you guys - so it looks like we have about 150 ministers here this morning.

A special welcome to you if you're a visitor with us this morning, & if you are, or you're new, out on the back table there are a some copies of our churches vision & sense of direction. You'll see there that our overarching vision is, as a church, to seek God's Kingdom & to grow a sense of community, real community with real relationships with one another & a real relationship with God. Within that vision one of our desires is to live out the New Testament idea of the priesthood of all believers, recognising that every single one of us here is gifted by God, and has something vital to offer. And as we pursue this vision, we'll keep asking ourselves how can we truly, genuinely demonstrate & proclaim God's love to each other & to the world around us.

So as this year unfolds we're going to be ongoing conversations about those things that can help us all grow & become more & more the people that God wants us to be, & more & more the kind of community that God wants us to be, having the kind of influence & impact on the world around us that God wants us to have. In this regard, today we are looking at a really key scripture: Micah 6:8 - which incidentally, is today's reading from the lectionary.

So a little bit of background on this prophet & this book. We know from what is said at the start of this short book, that Micah is from a town called Moresheth Gath, which was located near the border of Philistia, and it would have been a small agricultural town. In other words, Micah lived outside the governmental centres of power in either Jerusalem or Samaria, and had no connection to the temple or the Priesthood. And so he has the outsiders perspective, which may be one more reason - in addition to being a Prophet - that his prophecies & oratory so sharply critique the rich, the powerful, & the Priests, while showing a passionate concern for the poor and for those who were being oppressed or shunted aside—the lame, the outcasts, the afflicted, women and children.

A continual theme that runs through the Old Testament —and especially through the prophets—is that God expects Israel (and by extension, us) to build a just and merciful community, & a just & merciful society, in contrast to the oppressive system they had left behind in Egypt. The prophets regularly call the people of God & their leaders to repentance, to turning away from any act of injustice, oppression or corruption, and from anything that causes suffering for others - and back towards being a community of compassion and justice.

This is what is called *the prophetic tradition* of the Old Testament. And as we read through the Old Testament, we see this sharp critique of their nations own traditions, & practices, ever present in the mouths of the prophets. And this is one of the great gifts that the Biblical tradition has given to the world: this ability to step outside your own culture, measure it against God's standards, & to critique it where it falls short. Critiquing it, not because they despise their nation or their religion, but because they love it, & want to see it being the best it can be. Now we in places like NZ often take this prophetic tradition for granted, but we shouldn't, because its a precious gift that not all cultures have access to. In Cambodia, when Susan & I were living there, people were terribly afraid of ever being overheard criticising their Govt or their leaders, and with good reason, because they could easily find themselves thrown in prison or lying dead in a ditch somewhere. And of course the prophets in the Bible also faced those same kinds of risks, and they were courageous

people. The prophet Nathan took his life in his hands when he rebuked King David, and every prophet after him took their life in their hands when they too challenged the wealthy & the powerful of their day.

Now one of the things that surely has to make us uncomfortable as a church, is the awareness that one of the roles of the Prophets was to also critique the religious practices and the religious institutions of Israel & Judah.

For example - The prophet Hosea told us that '*God desires mercy, not religious sacrifices*' (a verse Jesus quotes several times) . The prophet Amos told us '*away with the noise of your religious songs & your stringed instruments - but instead let justice roll down like a river*' (5:24); the prophet Zechariah told us "*Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.*" (7:9-10) The prophet Isaiah told us "*I'm sick of your burnt offerings; I'm sick of your religious festivals - seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the fatherless and plead the case of the widow*' (Isa 1). Their message is unnervingly consistent: God isn't interested in our religious shows: he is much more interested in whether we are living just and compassionate lives. The other consistent theme running through the prophets, is that those in society with the most power, i.e. those who are wealthy, & those in leadership, are the one most rigorously & vigorously held to a standard of account by God.

OK lets look at the actual passage we have for today: Micah 6:1 - 8 which begins by reminding the people of Israel what God has done for them, saying - '*I bought you up out of Egypt, I redeemed you from slavery, I gave you leaders & formed you into a community*'. This goes on to verse 5 where then there are a couple of references referring back to Israel's wandering in the desert, during the exodus. The first reference is to an incident way back in Numbers chap 22 when Balak, the King of the Moabites paid money to Balaam (who was a Midianite seer or diviner or prophet) to put a curse on God's people, but Balaam found he couldn't because God's blessing was protecting them; & the 2nd reference, also in verse 5, is where it says '*my people, remember your journey from Shiitim to Gilgal*' - & what that's a reference to, is this: Shiitim was a location still fairly on in Exodus wanderings where things went badly wrong for Israel, & the people fell into idol worship & gross immorality, & sickness & death followed; & it was a mess. Gilgal, on the other hand, is a location right near the completion of their journey, right on the cusp of entering the promised land. So this expression, *from Shiitim to Gilgal* is a short-hand way of describing the whole journey of God's people out of slavery & into the promised land; from chaos to promise; from aimless wandering to purposeful living; from disobedience to blessing. Which is kind of like our journey too, isn't it?

And when we go back to those early books of the Bible & read about the wanderings of the people of Israel, its quite frustrating reading isn't it? Two steps forward, one step backwards, then a few off to the side. They'll have these peak moments where God will do miracles for them, & provides for them & protects them & rescues them & they're like "*Yeah, God's awesome, lets just worship God*" & then a few pages later they're losing it again, & disobeying God or becoming really afraid, or they're encountering hardship and they're not sure if they can trust God anymore & they seem to have forgotten how God provided for them just a few pages earlier. But really, this really does parallel the same kind of journey most of us are on as well, doesn't it? I know it does for me. I also wander off the track; I also forget about the amazing things God has done & that I have seen in the past; I too start whinging when things get too hard.

But in the light of this amazing redemption; in the light of all that God has done for God's people; in the sheer light of who this awesome God is - the prophet Micah asks, in verses 6 & 7 - well, how can we repay God? How can we worship God? What does God really want from us? Is it slaughtered animals, like sheep or cows? Is it 10,000 rivers of olive oil; is it even - God forbid - a child sacrifice, like some of the surrounding nations were indulging in?

And the answer, in terms of sacrifices & offerings, is no, nothing. As all the prophets have said over & over: God does not need our sacrifices, regardless of how much religious hype or religious solemnity or decibel volume we put into it. God requires no more religiosity and no more sacrifices from us - because Jesus has made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf already. Jesus was, & is, the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. But in terms of life-style, and behaviour, & the direction we commit our lives to taking - yes, there is an offering that God wants from us. In fact, three offerings:

to act for justice, to love mercy; & to walk humbly with God.

These are three gracious strands which, if we allow God to weave together into our lives, & into our church, will form a really strong cord which will be both resilient & beautiful. A three stranded cord, which, as it says in Ecclesiastes, cannot be easily broken.

It would be good for us to pause now, & just ask God, what should my life look like, if I'm really doing these three things? If I'm really living for justice. If I'm really showing mercy. If I'm really seeking to walk humbly with God.

And what would it look like if we as a church were living for justice, for mercy, and walking humbly with God? (pause)

If it did feel like God was speaking to you in that time of quiet - please do come up & share it with me or Nancy or Richard, or with any of the elders. I've mentioned this before - but I really like Murray Robertson's approach to discernment in things like this. Get 6 others & go for it.

Right, I'm going to skip forward to Jesus now. It's my conviction that all scripture is designed to point us to Jesus, so let's go there now. These three things that Micah - & in fact all the prophets have been talking about, are absolutely key to understanding so much of what Jesus says & teaches in the gospels, & why he kept clashing with those in authority. In fact if we skip all the way over to Matthew chapter 23 - that chapter where Jesus seems to finally lose it with the religious leaders & the temple system - right in the middle of that chapter, in verse 23, Jesus actually paraphrases Micah 6:8

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former". Throughout the gospels, but its especially clear in this chapter, Jesus is flowing in the prophetic tradition of Micah, Isaiah, Amos, of Hosea, of Nathan - of all those who have gone before him. So just as Micah has critiqued, fiercely critiqued, the rulers of Israel & Judah for not ensuring justice for the weak and the poor, but instead using power & religion as way to make themselves rich, so too here in Matt 23 Jesus launches verbal barrage after verbal barrage on the religious leaders of his day for doing the very same kinds of things. In particular he rips into the religious leaders for a) preaching one thing,

but doing another; and b) for actually making it hard for people to find God, by piling so many rules & regulations on peoples backs.

*“You tie up heavy, burdensome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but you yourselves are not willing to lift a finger to help move them” (Matt 23:4)*

Throughout the gospels you see Jesus frequently getting angry with anyone who would dare to put an obstacle in the way of someone coming to know God & his love. (later Paul too)

Now we, the Christian church, down through the ages have all too often fallen into this same trap, & done the same kind of things that Jesus is tearing into the Pharisees for doing. Too many times down through the ages, and even today, we have presented Christianity to the world as if it were some kind of nit picking moral code book, & some kind of self-righteous club that only ‘good people’, people like us, are welcomed into. Too many times through history, we have shrunk this gospel of grace & love & compassion & mercy, down to the size of a rule book with which we’ve bashed other people over the head. We’ve shrunk the gospel down to moral law, and said “you need to keep this, or we’ll kick you out & condemn you to hell”

Now of course, there is a powerful moral & ethical code in the gospel. Its one that revolves around justice for the poor, mercy for the vulnerable, and forgiveness for the fallen.

The other big disservice the christian church has so often done, is to try & shrink the teachings of Jesus down to a set of precise doctrines & creeds, that no one is allowed to question, but had to unquestioningly accept & sign up to.

This sounds harsh, I know, but its true. Historically, the church has burned heretics, excommunicated radicals, and shunned sinners. We have damaged people in the name of God. We have done so many things that were almost the exact opposite of what Jesus tried to teach us to do.

But following Jesus is about neither of these things - self-righteous morality or unyielding doctrine. Yes of course our faith contains a strong moral code & a belief system, but those are 2 ndry. At its heart following Jesus is a way of life lived in relationship with the God who is head over heels in love with us, & who longs to empower us so that we can act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him. And actually - to walk humbly with each other as well. Authentically worshiping God is not about rules, or religiosity - its about relationship.

Do you remember, in the book of Acts, what words the first christians & the first church used to refer to themselves?

Followers of the Way (used 6 or 7 times). In John’s gospel of course, Jesus refers to himself as the Way (the way, the truth, the life), & we are followers of Jesus on the way he has made & shown us. The risen Jesus invites us into a dynamic relationship with him, whee we seek to live out what he has shown & taught us in the gospels, & where we seek to respond to his Spirit as he nudges us this way or that way.

Of course the other word the first Christians used to describe themselves is ‘disciple’, which means *learner* or *apprentice*.

So we're on this Way, this Path - on which we are constantly learning more about how to act for justice, about how to love mercy, about how to walk with God - and it's exciting, because we are always learning new things.

Its also humbling of course, because sometimes learning new things means realising we didn't know everything before, even when we thought we did.

So this Way, this path of following Jesus is a relational path, and its an exciting path. But not an easy path. And I would be misrepresenting the words of Jesus if I tried to tell you it was. God does ask us to do things which are hard, and even to go places which are hard, & particularly if we want to lead a life that's seeks justice for the oppressed & mercy for the marginalised. And I'm thinking of someone like Yolanda, over there in the Angeles in the Philippines, living & getting alongside women forced into the sex-trade. But we shouldn't be afraid of these calls & these challenges - because it is in these places that we learn the most & we grow the most, both as human beings & as followers of Jesus.

And I've got to say, this has been my own experience of the last 2 1/2 years, since I was diagnosed with cancer of my lymph system , & all the chemo-therapy that followed. In some ways this has been one of the hardest periods of my life - of course. But at the same time, truly, these past 2 1/2 years have been full of God, & full of learning new things & growing in new ways. There are all kinds of new & beautiful things I've seen & learned through this period that I couldn't have learned any other way.

No where in Scripture does Jesus say he offers us an easy life, or a cushy life. In fact he does tell us that the path of following him will be marked with hardship & suffering, as well as with joy. But his bottom line, his iron-clad promise in the midst of all that we encounter, both good & bad, is his promises that he will never leave us, nor forsake us; indeed, he promises each of us that he will be with us, even till the end of this age. This is a love that will not let us go.