

“WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?”

Micah 6:1-8

Those you who come along here regularly will know that we are currently working our way through the little books at the end of the Old Testament know as “The Minor Prophets”. As I often do, when I was getting down to prepare for this morning I looked back through my records to see whether I’d preached on this passage before and discovered that it had been our theme fourteen years ago when the Civic Service was held here. The service that year was towards the end of April and I’m sure many of you can remember what happened in May 1997. The sermon that morning – when the church was packed not only with members of the City Council but also the candidates themselves – began with the words “*The General Election looms*”.

Once again, those words are appropriate. We don’t yet know the date, but this will certainly be the year of a General Election and leading figures in all the main parties are starting to set out their stalls, with, as the media expressed it last weekend, the “unofficial election campaign” already under way. Many of you here this morning will be gearing up to participate in the election in all kinds of ways. Some of you because politics is your main interest. Some of you because you really do want to ensure that the party with the best policies (whatever that may mean) is the winner. Most of you because you will be exercising your democratic right to vote. Churches Together will no doubt organise the usual hustings with the main candidates participating. And, as Christians, that is something that we should indeed be involved in. But it’s not terribly simple, is it?

You see, each of the parties has its own Christian activists: Christians will be involved at all levels in local campaigning for all parties (I know there are active supporters of at least four different parties represented within the regular congregation of this church). In an article ahead of a previous election, Nigel Wright, the principal of Spurgeon’s Theological College and one-time President of the Baptist Union, observed that “*as Christians cast their votes most of them will cancel each other out.*” In some constituencies, it’s clear that Christians will be standing against each other for election (as has happened in London’s Mayoral Election on occasions). It will be very interesting to see what profile is given to Christianity (and, indeed, faith) after the election – whoever forms the next government.

But that is not to suggest that it’s a waste of time and we should not be involved at all in the processes of political life. We all have a responsibility to use our vote wisely, as well as the opportunities that an election provides for actually speaking to the candidates. It is heartening to see how eager candidates are to speak to the people during a campaign! I hope that Christians will take as their guidelines what we find in the Bible about our responsibilities to society and the part we have to play in working for a community which adheres to the biblical norms which, I believe, are there for all people. Of course, once again, people interpret different passages in the Bible in very different ways. But there are underlying themes which inform everything else, and which are to be the foundation for whatever policies we construct to bring the ideals to some kind of reality. Just for a few moments this morning, it is right for us to consider what should be the bedrock for a society which is at least trying to put its declared religion into practice – after all, the claim that we are still a Christian country is often heard, even from the lips of those whose shadow never darkens the doors of a church.

Running throughout the various books which make up the book we call the Bible, is the idea that true religion finds its expression in ensuring that no-one is denied the opportunity to experience all that God has to offer his people. James sums it up rather neatly in the letter from which we read just now, in which he wrote to the first generation of Christians who were scattered around the Roman Empire and struggling with the issues of keeping faith alive in a largely hostile environment: “*If anyone considers himself religious and does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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.*” (James 1:26,27)

Those words are not an isolated example. Wherever we look in the Bible there are similar sentiments expressed. And in the passage we have just read from *Micah 6*, this morning's Minor Prophet, where the prophet sets out the true essence of religion, we have what many scholars consider to be one of the most important passages in the writings of the prophets. Micah was preaching to a people who had grown rather self-satisfied and felt that they no longer really needed to pay too much attention to the laws which had been given them by God as a framework for their life as a nation and as a part of the wider world.

These words make it very clear indeed that there is far more to religion than a mere outward show. It's not just adherence to the system of ritual and liturgy of worship that is the true demonstration of one's faith. Popping along to the Temple and offering a sacrifice when it's required, turning up to church every now and then, is not an adequate expression of true faith. Nor is one's faith to be a kind of privatised piety, an inner – almost secret – devotion to God which has no impact on one's behaviour or one's relationship with the community of which one is a part. Alastair Campbell's notorious "We don't do God" is not to be the mantra of any Christian – in politics or anywhere else.

In this passage, which takes the form (favoured by many of the prophets) of a kind of courtroom exchange between God and his people, in which he sets out his case and asks for them to reply, Micah shows that our lives as human beings are to be lived in response to what God has done for us – in *grateful* response, as well. God is portrayed as saying to his people, "What have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Why are you rejecting me after all I've done for you?" He expresses his disappointment, his sadness, that they see him as some kind of oppressive God, someone who is heaping on them unnecessary burdens – when he is, in fact, the God of liberation, the God of intervention.

Here, the liberation is from the oppression of their exile in Egypt; the intervention is in their history to make clear to them his "*righteous acts*", the fulfilling of his covenant with them. Supremely, God's liberating and intervening character was demonstrated 700 years after this book was written as Jesus came into our torn and broken world to announce the inauguration of a new Kingdom, a new reign of justice and peace. You may justifiably object that there is little evidence of that today: things seem no better now than they did in Micah's day, or in first century Palestine. The difference now, though, is hope – hope that the long-term future will bring this kingdom to its fulfilment. There is now the possibility of men and women renewing their original relationship with God, of being liberated from the fear and anxiety of a future with no hope at all.

Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom – which will one day (soon, we believe) come to fruition – with his teaching, his example and, ultimately, his death and resurrection. As he hung naked, bleeding and humiliated on the cross, he was taking on himself the consequences of all our wrong choices, our wrong decisions, our selfishness and our rebellion. He bore the weight of the world's sin. And a couple of days later he burst out of the tomb to show that there was no longer anything to fear, not even death. Nothing can now stand between us and God – if we choose to take that option. You know, it amazes me that people are prepared to bet on the Lottery, on the movement of stocks and shares in the financial markets, on the next government, but are not really prepared to take the risk of believing that what Jesus taught and lived and said and did is actually worth taking seriously.

If you stop and think about it – if you look at Jesus rather than his followers (who have often made such a mess of his teaching), if you look at the Bible rather than the attempts others have made to try and twist it to their own ends, you will see that God is a God of great grace and mercy. He has given us a beautiful world and a brilliant set of guidelines by which to make the most of it. It's us that have messed things up: that's why our experience of life is often so broken, so draining, so full of pain. But still God provides a way out of the mess. And it is a response to that great love that we are called to offer as our religion.

The people of Micah's day had started to grasp that. But their response was inadequate. They thought it was all to do with slaughtering animals, with extravagant ritual gestures – even, like those who worshipped other gods, with offering your own children as some kind of sacrifice (v7). But that didn't really hit the nail on the head. They might offer sacrifices, but they weren't living the rest of their lives as

God wanted. Look at *Micah 2:1,2; 7:2,3; 6:10-12*, or at *Amos 8:4-6*, or at *Isaiah 58:3,4*. Their sacrifices may have been well-meant in some ways, but they weren't what God wanted. And that's still the case. In the New Testament, as we have already noted, James makes the case in *James 1:22; 2:14,17*.

Just indulging in a few religious rituals is no response to God. Mousing a few platitudes about your faith and your religious leanings won't do the trick. In Micah's time, the specifically religious side of the faith of the people was stressed in such a way that it was conveniently forgotten that God's sovereignty extended over the whole of life. Whatever some well-meaning Christians might want to believe, you won't change society simply by reintroducing an act of worship at the beginning of the school day. You won't build a better Britain just by going to church more often.

"Look," says Micah at the beginning of v8, "you know what you should be doing." It is there in your conscience (if it's still operating). It's there in God's word. It's there in his guidelines for all creation. It's there if you look around you and see what's happened when you've tried all the other options and none of them seem to be working. And what is that? "*What does the Lord require of you?*" What does the Lord require of us ordinary people, of those of us who have influence and clout in this world, of those whom we elect to serve us in local authorities, in national government, in international forums? What does the Lord require of you and me, the people who make up communities and societies and nations and cultures?

He requires three things; three things that are there wherever you look in the Bible; three things that are the non-negotiable foundation of the Law of Moses and of the teaching of Jesus; three things that we need to get right if we are to have any chance at all of building a society which serves everyone adequately and righteously. "*Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*"

1. ACT JUSTLY

Demonstrate justice in all your dealings with other people. God has provided a world for us in which there is enough for everyone and in which he originally intended everyone to have an equal share. If ever you get the chance, look through all those apparently archaic and irrelevant laws which make up part of the early Old Testament. Health and safety; employment legislation; community welfare; protection for the poor, orphaned and widowed; safeguards against excessive profits and economic oppression – it's all there. You don't need to set up government commission to work it out. And it's all there for everyone, not just for the elite. When you are looking through the manifestos of the parties, when you are reading the potted versions in the newspapers and magazines, when you listen to the televised debates, when you quiz the candidates at the door, ask yourself if there is any justice in what you read and hear.

Usually any pronouncement on the subject of justice at election time is limited to the narrow area of criminal justice. Prosperity for all, personal prosperity, rights for this group and that group (by and large those who are able to afford them) – those are the themes of most recent elections. What about our responsibilities to the poor of other nations – on whose backs our prosperity has been won? What about the escalating burden of debt on the poor of the world and on the easily duped of our society? If we have any desire at all to call ourselves a just society, then we need more than a couple of lines and a vague aspiration in the back of a manifesto on the subject of our response to the growing problems of the wider world.

All three major parties have trumpeted our success in the arms industry and then wrung their hands at the awful way in which people are using those arms in what we patronisingly call irresponsible regimes? Is that just? (Frankly, I'm ashamed of it.) How can we claim to be a caring and sharing society when the talk is always of individual rights and personal prosperity? Is that really just? As one writer on these verses has expressed it, "*Justice covers and transcends a host of negative precepts, such as prohibition of oppression, perjury and bribery. It calls for a sense of responsibility towards weaker members of society lest they go to the wall. It insists on the rights of others; it demands an instinct for social preservation.*"

Now, I have no doubt that all the parties would claim that they were trying to move towards that. It's up to you and me to try and discern which policies will actually move us towards that. As the great Reformer John Calvin said: "*Justice, which is to be exercised towards men, is the real evidence of true religion.*" And it won't work at all without the second thing.

2. LOVE MERCY

This is to do with relationship, with covenant love for one another. It means faithfulness to all people, reaching out to those in need and showing love for them. Much of what it entails is, indeed, assumed within the idea of justice, but there is that added dimension of a realisation that what you are doing you are doing for people. And people need to be seen as such – not as units of production, as statistics, as objects of manipulation.

This will obviously impact on all areas of life, from criminal justice and prisons policy through to the emphasis on the family as a relational, a covenantal entity. Jesus, picking up on the things which were at the very heart of the Law of Moses, told his followers to "*love your neighbour as yourself.*" That is an impossibility in a system which is founded entirely on competition: it is a logical, philosophical impossibility. Of course, there is room in any society for an element of competition, but when everything is subjected to that same criterion, relationship and mercy go out of the window.

Once again, our model and our motivation is the Lord Jesus Christ, who demonstrated in his own life the wonderful mercy of God towards us. He died there for you, whether you want to accept that or not. He took the risk of dying for you, even though you might not accept it. And can you look up into his agonised, sweat-riven, bloodstained face and say, "You're a fool. I have no intention of responding to what you are doing for me by showing love to anyone else"?

3. WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD

Of course, that covenant relationship with your fellow men and women, that desire to live and act justly, is going to be pretty well impossible if your relationship with God isn't sorted out. A sense of God's presence, an acknowledgement of his love for you, a deep awareness of your need of him is vital. Micah doesn't say here, "Give a friendly nod towards God if you think it might impress people." He is calling his hearers at that time, and his readers down through the centuries, to recognise God's ways and his sovereignty. God is our Creator: he knows best how we should operate. If we want to get the very best out of life, out of the world in which he has placed us, then we need to follow his instructions, and to concede that there are times when we don't know what's best, when we need his help.

I have tried very hard this morning to avoid any party bias. (Those of you who worship here regularly might guess how difficult that has been!) And so I shall not identify the person of whom I am now going to speak. (In fact, I don't think he's in politics any more.) I remember listening to the radio one morning before a previous election and was horrified and angered by the patronising and arrogant attitude of the politician in the hot seat. I do not think I have ever heard a more ill-mannered, evasive and, at times, abusive person responding to the general public. It was as far as it is possible to get from someone "*walking humbly with their God*". There was not even the hint that anything might have been misjudged, or badly handled. The person would not even concede the faintest possibility of defeat.

Those who walk humbly with their God are prepared to listen to their fellow men and women. And, far more importantly, they are prepared to listen to God, to what he says in his word, the Bible. Without that, I am afraid, there can really be no acting justly and no loving mercy. The words of Micah and his contemporaries went unheeded and God's people suffered the consequences. As the election draws closer, many people will simply express their frustration or their apathy (can you *express* apathy?) and give the whole process a very wide berth. I would like to think that those who call themselves Christians

will think and pray about their choices and that those who are eventually accorded the privilege and responsibility of leading us will do so with justice and mercy. If we, as a society, as a nation, are to live as God wants us to; if we are to have a future that will move us away from selfishness and brokenness, then we need to turn to God and seek his help, to look up at the cross of Calvary for a glimpse of the liberating and intervening God – and to respond in gratitude and humility to all that he has done for us by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with him. That's what the Lord requires of our politicians – and of you and me!

Discussion notes on next page

THE MESSAGE OF MICAH
Micah 6:1-8

Micah is another of the prophets of whom we know very little. He is referred to in *Jeremiah 26:18* and we know that he comes from Moresheth in Judah. He prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in Judah, which puts him somewhere between 750BC and 686BC and means he is a contemporary of Isaiah (and he has a very similar literary style).

The overall message alternates between oracles of doom and oracles of hope and he speaks of judgment and of deliverance by God, stressing that God hates idolatry, injustice and empty formalism but loves those who truly repent.

At the heart of the message of Micah is *6:8* – “*He has showed you what is good. What does the LORD require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*” The people know what God really wants of them – it’s in their conscience if nowhere else – but Micah summarises it in these words. We have it too in the pages of the Bible – and these three things are the non-negotiable foundation of the Law of Moses and the teaching of Jesus: three things we need to get right still today if we are to have any chance at all of building a society which serves everyone adequately and righteously. They are the characteristics of the Kingdom of God.

1. ACT JUSTLY

At a time when we are being called to “Make Poverty History”, we need desperately to heed these words. Our own society seems to be built on personal prosperity and individual rights, things which do not help to create a climate of justice for all. “*Justice covers and transcends a host of negative precepts, such as prohibition of oppression, perjury and bribery. It calls for a sense of responsibility towards weaker members of society lest they go to the wall. It insists on the rights of others; it demands an instinct for **social** preservation.*” As John Calvin wrote: “*Justice, which is to be exercised towards men, is the real evidence of true reign.*” (cf *James 1:27*)

2. LOVE MERCY

This is to do with relationship, with covenant love for one another. It is about what Jesus referred to as loving our neighbour, but we find it very easy to minimise the demands of that by interpreting “love” differently and by making “neighbour” much less inclusive. The people of Micah’s day were actually oppressing and exploiting their neighbours. Our motivation must be Jesus himself.

3. WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD

There are three elements to this. **Walk** suggests that we are to make progress – this cannot be a static relationship, but one which develops. **Humbly** clearly points towards a selfless and dependent relationship. **With your God** recognises that it is only in a relationship with him that we will ever get the best out of life, and ever have the opportunity of knowing true liberation.

Questions for discussion

1. Can we legitimately take the words of a prophet from the Old Testament era and apply them to our own situation? Why/why not?
2. What do you understand by “justice”?
3. How can we truly “love our neighbour”? What does it mean in practice?
4. There is almost certain to be an election this year. In what ways could we apply these tests to our choices when voting?