

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET - MICAH”

Micah 5:1-15

Micah, the prophet from Moresheth, stands in the market place. His native land is in crisis. All around him there is evidence of religious apostasy: the faith of his forbears is no longer a priority in the lives of his fellow countrymen. Idolatry is rife. And social injustice stares at him from every side. The rich are getting richer, more powerful and more arrogant. The poor are getting poorer, more oppressed and more disenfranchised. There is a pretence of religion – the merchants and the landowners attend the regular rituals and go through the motions on the Sabbath, but the rest of the week they are out at the Asherah poles, sacrificing to pagan gods and indulging in witchcraft. They fleece the poor and cheat each other. The nation is going to rack and ruin.

And within Micah the prophet there burns a deep anger at what he sees. He knows that this is not the way it should be, that there is another way, an alternative way. He can see in his mind's eye what should be happening – and what will happen if things do not change. His heart is filled with a passion for his God and for the ways of his God. The Holy Spirit of Yahweh is at work within him and he cries out to the passers-by: *“Hear, O people, all of you, listen, O earth and all who are in it, that the Sovereign LORD may witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple”* (1:2). It's a speech that is proclaimed to the men and women who are there in front of him, but it's aimed at all his compatriots – indeed, it deserves the attention of all humankind. And as the words of poetry and prophecy pour out of him into the hot, still air of the Middle Eastern market place, silencing the shouts and cries of the stall holders and their customers, it is the voice of God that is heard.

Micah the prophet rails against the injustice and the apostasy of his culture. He identifies and emphasises the sins and crimes of those who plan iniquity and plot evil – those who oppress and seize and defraud, those who pervert their faith and despise their God. And he tells them that, just as they plan evil, so their God is planning disaster for them. They will be humiliated and defeated, their power will evaporate, their homes will be overrun and their plans overturned. Punishment is on its way. The crisis will deepen and the nation will be trampled underfoot.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There is an alternative. God will punish, but he will also deliver and redeem. And through the crisis and the chaos, beyond the punishment and despair, there shines a light. It's not a very bright light yet. The day of its coming is a long way off. But one day, one day there will be a way out of all this. Amongst all the destruction and judgement, God is preparing a peace-bringer, a saviour – there is the promise of *shalom*, of health and wholeness, peace and stability and well-being. God has a plan.

This ruler for Israel will come from unlikely roots – not from the palaces and temple of Jerusalem, not from the cities of renown and riches, but from lowly Bethlehem, the “House of Bread”, the City of David. Jerusalem is to be besieged and its ruler humiliated, but Bethlehem will become a place of fame and faith. Out of that lowly town will come someone whose rule will be benign and just, a ruler who will put right the wrongs of the past and show a new way, a better way to live for the future, a ruler who will have his roots in the eternal past and whose wisdom will be the wisdom of the ages. This ruler will be the earthly embodiment of the Ancient of Days, the one who was before the earth began, the firstborn over all creation. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. This is the timeless, limitless ruler who will make known to all people the timeless, limitless love of God.

And Micah the prophet, from whose mouth come the very words of God, goes on to describe this eternal ruler in terms which inspire awe and reverence, but which also invite a response of love and devotion. This ruler will be a shepherd to his flock (5:4a) – one who leads, guides, provides for his people, just like David, the shepherd-king – but greater, more powerful, more loving than David could ever have hoped to be. This is the shepherd-king of whom David wrote in *Psalms 23* – he leads beside still waters, restores the soul, guides in the paths of righteousness, and even walks confidently through the valley of the shadow of death.

He will stand in the strength of the LORD, says Micah the prophet (5:4b). The entire resources of Yahweh, great God of the ages and Lord of all peoples, will be at his disposal. He will have all the fullness of God in him and one day every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow before him and every tongue will confess him as Lord. His power is beyond telling and he will be able to overcome anything and everything that stands in his way: evil, injustice oppression, death will be forced to give way before him. The blind will see, the oppressed will be given their liberty, the imprisoned will be freed, the poor will receive his good news. Nothing will ever be able to defeat him or those who stand with him. His love and protection will make all those who identify themselves with him to be more than conquerors.

And in exercising that strength, this ruler will show that he also stands in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God (5:4c). His will be the name that is above every other name, the name that has power in the very speaking of it, the name which will give access to the Father, the name at which demons and devils will cower and wither. It will be a name which will bring salvation to many, persecution to many and hope for all humanity, a majestic name – a name to be carved in the finest woods, overlaid with the purest gold, a name to be stamped on coins and printed in myriad books, a name that will be borne with

pride, a comfort for many and an offence to many, but a name that has an undeniable and incontrovertible wonder attached to it.

There will be a greatness about this ruler that will reach to the very ends of the earth (5:4d). No-one will be able to remain ignorant of his existence and all peoples will be affected by him. His influence will be worldwide, way beyond the limits of the world known by Micah the prophet and his bewildered listeners. This ruler is not to be pictured in the image of some local clan leader, struggling to enforce his will on a group of raggle-taggle nomads and farmers; not even in the image of the great rulers whose names were whispered with awe amongst Micah's contemporaries – Tiglath-Pileser, Sennacherib, the great kings of Assyria and Babylon, kings whose riches and power were beyond the wildest imaginings of the poor of Moresheth, whose palaces were bigger than Israelite villages, whose treasuries contained the plunder from countless raids on neighbouring friends and enemies alike, whose empires seemed to stretch to the very ends of the earth. But those empires were bordered by other empires, as yet unexplored by Micah's people, and there were others across the seas whose existence was not even imagined. And this ruler, this powerful shepherd-king would make his greatness known throughout them all. All nations will come and worship him, all will acknowledge his name, even if they do not pledge allegiance to him.

This great, powerful, strong, loving king will be a source of peace (5:5). His reign will not be characterised by invasion and warfare. His rule will not be a rule of oppression and injustice. His quality will be that of a bringer of peace, an establisher of *shalom*. It will not be simply a rule where war and violence are absent. Those people who listened to the proclamation of Micah the prophet knew what *shalom* was all about: they knew what it was all about because they longed for it. They longed for an end to oppression, to poverty, to disease, to strife, to fear and insecurity. They longed for the fat cats to disappear and for their lands and their inheritance to be restored. They longed for enough to eat after they'd paid their rents and their taxes and their protection money. They longed for an end to foreign armies massing on their borders. They longed for a renewed relationship with their God.

And this ruler would bring it. He would bring *shalom* – not just for them but for all humankind. He would bring about God's purposes for all creation. He would bring harmony between neighbours and between nations. He would bring healing and wholeness. He would bring the redemption, the glorious, restored relationship between and humankind and their Creator that had been planned for all eternity.

And then, seven hundred years after Micah the prophet stood up to give voice to the burning, violent passion within him, seven hundred years after the poetry and prophecy in the market place, into that lowly House of Bread, the city of David, the least important town in the region of Ephrathah, was born a bawling, bloodied baby whose first bed was a feeding trough and whose first visitors were rough talking,

hard living shepherds. Majestic, powerful, great ruler? It didn't seem so. Human expression of the Ancient of Days? Hardly.

But as that insignificant baby from an insignificant town in an insignificant province of the mighty Roman Empire grew in size and wisdom, so his name became the scourge of evil spirits, his strength outfaced the very Devil himself, his greatness was declared through a victory on a cross of wood, his majesty blazed from an empty tomb. Micah the prophet had no idea how these words would be fulfilled, but now, two thousand seven hundred years later, we see the reign of *shalom* is a possibility – no, more than that, a certain hope – for all those who put their trust in the ruler, the shepherd-king, in Jesus the Christ.

*And still the days are hastening on -
by prophet bards foretold –
towards the fullness of the time
when comes the age foretold.
Then heaven and earth renewed shall see
The Prince of Shalom, their king;
And all the earth repeat the song
Which now the angels sing.*

Through Micah's burning but blurred vision, there is the promise of a Saviour, a Lord, a Kingly Messiah. He is the one we worship, the one we praise, the one to whom we pray, the one in whom we trust. He will restore God's good creation to its original plan and purpose. He will establish God's Kingdom, that sovereign, holy, perfect rule of God. As with all these Minor Prophets, it all points towards Jesus, to whom we owe all allegiance, all honour – everything! – and from whom we receive forgiveness and hope.

These impassioned words of Micah, the prophet of Moresheth, close like this:

*Who is a God like you,
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?
You do not stay angry for ever
but delight to show mercy.
You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.
You will be faithful to Jacob,
and show love to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our ancestors
in days long ago.*

Hallelujah!