

Micah 6:1-8: Sunday 9 May 2021

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Quite often this last verse – verse 8 is used to epitomise God's command to mankind. It is a nice social justice text quoted out of context usually to mean we Christians must act justly, be kind to others and be humble. But actually it's a question asking the people of Israel "what is good?" and "what does God require of you?" This verse comes after God's challenges to the people of Israel who have failed to rely on God and instead think they can do what they want so long as they perform religious observances - like the right sacrifices and even going as far to appease God with sacrificing one's children in order to be gain forgiveness or gain God's attention because things aren't going the way they should.

Micah was in Jerusalem around the time that the Assyrians were besieging it, things were looking desperate. God is saying that Israel has brought disaster upon herself because she has consistently broken the covenant made with her.

The Lord's revelation to Micah reminds the people of Israel that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt: they themselves did nothing to achieve this. God fed them and watered them in the wilderness for 40 years: they themselves did nothing to achieve this. Even their clothes and sandals didn't wear out: they relied on God and it cost them nothing. God led them out of the hands of the Moabites and into the promised land at Gilgal: it cost them nothing. When the people relied on God, they were in good hands. God has always honoured His side of the covenant. He provided Israel with a land of milk and honey, a system of justice, and supernatural protection from neighbouring nations who so often sought to attack Israel. In the book of Judges we see how quickly things went wrong. When the people relied on their own devices, they were sinful and things went badly. After that Israel wanted a king, they got into deeper trouble because most of the kings wanted to be like the pagan kings: powerful, greedy, selfish and thinking they were able to do what they wanted instead of relying on God. Some thought they could bribe God with lavish sacrifices, forgetting that God wanted them to love Him, obey His commandments, and trust Him. God no longer was the only one in whom they put their trust, but just part of their religion requiring animal sacrifices, some festivals, some priests paid to run through their duties in the temple. When dependence on God changes into mouthing words without love, mouthing words of praise without meaning any of them,

performing rituals, sacrificing a few or even a lot of animals as a down payment on protection, God got not just disappointed but angry. The people of Israel didn't even pretend to believe God was the only god... they openly hedged their bets and performed the rituals needed to appease the false gods of their neighbours. Is this where many in our country are today who put Christian on their census forms?

In the days of Jesus 700 years later, after Israel had briefly regained independence under the Maccabees, and then lost it under the Romans, the scribes, the teachers of the Law, the Pharisees all thought how fortunate they were that they knew that they needed to obey the Law and perform all the rituals to please God, and how fortunate they were to be the ones to know what was what to make them righteous. They followed the same legalistic path as their forefathers who angered God 700 years earlier. They missed the two most important things God asked of them: to love Him and to love their neighbours as themselves. God is love. He loves Israel. It is a mystery to us that despite everything that human beings do that disappoint Him, He still loves us, and all He wants in return is for us to love Him and our neighbours. God's covenant with Israel wasn't just about observances of rituals and performing the bare minimum to satisfy requirements that were personally costly while paying a lot of attention to things that cost nothing. Much of God's covenant was about the love of others, about treating others with justice and mercy, especially people who were poor or who were vulnerable to injustice because less able to control their own situations. Israel hadn't put much emphasis on this, she had satisfied herself with liturgical observances. Or, to put it in modern terms, she was content to go to church, she felt her religious obligations had been satisfied by going to church; she then went on the rest of the week serving herself and largely ignoring the needs of others, and, in the case of the rich and powerful, trampling on the weaker brothers in a mad dash to greater wealth for themselves.

This passage emphasises the failure of Israel's faith in God by her people's indifference to justice and mercy toward others, especially toward those who are poorer or weaker than themselves.

So what is good? We all know none of us is good; we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Every one of us deserves to be punished for our sins. None of us can say like the rich young man that he obeyed all the commandments... we have all broken most of them. So many people today claim to be good people: they delude themselves by excusing what they consider "little white lies", "helping themselves to things that no one will miss", "not swearing very much", "being envious of what others have is only natural when you have less than them", "being unfaithful towards those you claim to love is part of life, and everyone ends up there some time or other" etc etc. There are no big or little sins: all sin is unholy because all sin comes out of the heart of man, the desire to do to others what you would not want others to do to you... to be selfish, unkind, unloving. The Fruits of the Spirit are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faith, gentleness and self-control". Sinfulness is the opposite which is summed up by doing whatever you fancy regardless of consequences. God poses a question: "what is good?" knowing the answer is to love Him and your neighbour as yourself.

The church, of whatever denomination has always had plenty of people in it who have made the same mistake as Israel in Micah's days and the Pharisees in the days of Jesus, and all of us know we are guilty of the same failing, more or less. Are we Christians because of the acts of devotion to God that we perform? Reading our Bibles, worshipping together, making time for God, was what the Pharisees did. But are we like them if we do very little, if anything for periods of time,

that could be described as acting justly and loving mercy toward other people? But justice and mercy are fundamental to God's purpose for our lives and fundamental to the intention of his grace in our lives. If acts of worship are loving God, then justice and mercy are loving our neighbour as ourselves. Which, of course, is also loving God! These are the commandments that Jesus meant when he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Israel thought of changing God but not of the need to change herself. Her people did not cry out to God for the forgiveness of their sins. They wanted God to do what they wanted. They wanted God to protect them and let them get on with their lives without obeying His commandments. The covenant God made with Israel and the same one Jesus makes with us cannot contain opt out clauses and deletions of things we find don't suit us. The rich young man who said he followed all the rules was unaware that he broke the two key ones: love God and love your neighbour. He was like Israel in Micah's day, and had lost sight that trusting God would provide for all his needs. Wealth makes us comfortable. An unwillingness to share what we don't really deserve, leads to a lack of understanding that we have received a priceless gift that we don't deserve from Jesus. In Micah's day, Israel was ignorant of God's grace and her people weren't gracious towards each other and other nations. Israel was blind to God's justice, and as a result was not just herself.

I have read a few commentaries on these verses and quite a few refer to how God established a society without debt: all debts were cancelled every seven years (Deut 15) After the Jubilee year – every 50 years, all land sold was to be restored to its original owners. They go on to say how we – not any of us personally – but our governments, our banks, those lending money, should cancel the debts of the poor – not just the poor who borrowed in the UK, but the poor in poor countries. It's easy to say this if it's not your money that will be used to do this. Imagine the outcry if the money in your bank account was taken from you (because strictly speaking you have lent it to the bank in the expectation the bank will repay you when you ask for it back) to write off debts the bank had. If the banks just said, sorry, we've used your money to cancel the borrowings of those we've lent to because that is the right thing to do to help these people and nations, would any of us deposit money with a bank knowing a cancellation year was coming up? Even worse, when a Jubilee year came up, our homes would revert to the land owner or his descendants who had it 50 years earlier. If all those we lent money to, had their debt cancelled, would we be happy about that? The sabbath debt cancellation year came up every seven years and applied to borrowers who were really needy as well as feckless borrowers who managed to convince someone to lend them money to buy stuff they really didn't need. Where's the justice in that? That's the same as what the communists did – stealing from those who have wealth (money, investments, property) so that the "people" could share it out "fairly" to create a "just" "kinder" "better" but godless society. We all know how that ended – starting off on what was supposed to be fair and just and ending with tyranny, injustice and wealth in the hands of the few. Exactly what happened in Israel in Micah's day because God was not really involved in people's lives anymore. They thought they could manage without Him. It took about 500 years for the people of Israel to be freed from slavery in Egypt to get where they were going to be enslaved and deported from Israel and scattered in foreign lands by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, while it took only a decade or two for the USSR's ambitions to become the godless workers' paradise to fade into a dream as Stalin's regime became even worse than the Tsar's

ever was in the name of justice, fairness, liberty, fraternity and equality for all. The lesson for us is that a godless society will always end in a worse society if it replaces a God fearing society. The Tsar's regime may have been terrible, but for everyone there was the opportunity to know God and become Christlike. The communist regime pushed God into the background and denied His existence. God made all of us with a conscience and the capacity to love, but sin can erase consciences and erase love. The devil knows how to twist what is good into what is bad. We have seen in every government (dictatorships and democracies) acting for apparently good and justifiable reasons doing things that were not based on God's commandments which end up treating people badly and having unintended consequences.

Back to the debt question. On a personal level the answer is never to lend money: just give to the needy from the resources you have and aren't using yourself. If you can lend money or things – that means you aren't needing them right now, or even later. Just give away as the Spirit leads. That way debt cancellation won't affect you and you'll never be disappointed when you're not repaid!

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? - Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

I was going to tell you a story about Boris Nicholayevich Kornfeld, but I've timed this talk and it adds another 10 minutes... this is what I didn't say but is a good example of how one man can change lives.

At this point you may think I've gone round the houses saying the same thing over and over, so let me read out to you a story about a Russian Jewish doctor named Boris Kornfeld. Some of you may have heard it or read about it before, but bear with me for those who haven't. Kornfeld was a Russian Jew and a doctor. Apparently his family had embraced the Communist Revolution and were not very religious. They had welcomed the removal of the Tsar and the new socialist/communist regime promising the workers' paradise with fairness and justice for all. But at some point Kornfeld had run foul of the Communist government and landed in prison. It was a political crime, but no one knows what precisely it was that he did. Perhaps he had the temerity to criticize the government or its leader, Stalin, in some public setting. At any rate, in the early 1950s, Kornfeld was sent to a concentration camp. It was there that he became a Christian as a result of divine grace. In Russia for centuries the Russian Orthodox Church was anti-semitic and did little to stop pogroms and ill-treatment of Jews.

But in the camps, all was different. There Kornfeld found real Christians who were, as he was, suffering for their beliefs. One devout Christian, well-educated and very kind — we don't know this man's name — spoke to Kornfeld of a Jewish Messiah who had come to save his people from their sins. He tailored his witness to this Jewish doctor, reminding him that Jesus had preached almost exclusively to Jews and that his coming was in fulfilment of promises God had made to the Jews. He would say the words of the Lord's Prayer over and over again in Kornfeld's hearing. Kornfeld had already lost his hope of salvation through socialism, but to accept Christ seemed to him a betrayal of his people, his family, his past.

Kornfeld had it easier than most in the camps because doctors were scarce and very much needed. He had occasion in his work as a doctor to provide medical care, even surgery for the guards. He was tempted to suture an artery, for example, in such a way that it would reopen after surgery, the guard would bleed to death and no one would be the wiser. He hated these men with a passion for their cruelty. And was then appalled by his own hatred and the violence he found in his own heart. He was trapped, he found, by the evil

he despised. And, then, he began to cry out for forgiveness, as his friend had taught him, and began to see how that forgiveness could come only through Jesus Christ.

Now doctors were required, among other things, to sign authorization for the assignment of prisoners to the punishment blocks. There prisoners who the authorities wanted out of the way were confined to solitary life in cold, dark, and tiny cells. A doctor's signature certified that a prisoner was strong enough to withstand such punishment. It was almost always a lie and usually a death sentence.

Right after he began to pray for the forgiveness of his sins, Kornfeld began refusing to sign the punishment forms. He had signed hundreds of them before, but no longer. Whatever had occurred inside of his heart, it would not permit him to treat other human beings that way any longer.

What is more, Kornfeld reported an orderly, a prisoner who co-operated with the guards, for stealing food. As a reward they were given better conditions, better jobs. The rest of the prisoners hated them because of their treason, but also because they abused their power and got away with it because the guards turned a blind eye. The guards needed these men to control the prison and let them get away with almost anything.

While making his rounds one day, Kornfeld came upon a patient with a disease common in the camps, pellagra. Malnutrition induced pellagra (vitamin B3 Niacin deficiency) which, in turn, made digestion difficult and finally impossible. Its victims literally starved to death. Kornfeld had ordered chalk, good white bread, and herring to stop the diarrhoea and to get nutrients into the man's blood, but he was too far gone. His face had become dark; just one deep bruise; his skin was peeling off his hands. Just after leaving this patient, Kornfeld came across an orderly with his mouth stuffed with the white bread that had been meant for the pellagra patients. Kornfeld had known about the stealing, had known it was one reason why the pellagra patients did not recover, but now, with the sight of the dying man so fresh in mind, he could not go on as before.

Everyone knew what was going on. What is more, there were countless other reasons why patients died and did not recover from illness. The sanitation was primitive and completely insufficient, the medical supplies virtually non-existent, his surgeries were performed in such conditions as to make many of them virtually mercy killings. But, Kornfeld could not go on as before. He reported the orderly to the commandant and the commandant, strangely, put the orderly in the punishment block for three days, perhaps, so it was thought, to solve the problem of Kornfeld's refusal to sign the punishment forms. By reporting the orderly and having him punished, so the commandant reasoned, Kornfeld had arranged his own execution.

Kornfeld was not an especially brave man. He knew his life was now at risk. He began sleeping in the hospital, catching sleep when he could, afraid to sleep in his bed for fear of being murdered. But, having taken the fateful step, he now found a new freedom to do what he felt was right. He signed no more papers to send men to their deaths; he no longer turned his eyes from cruelty; he said what he wanted and did what he could. And soon he realized that the anger and hatred that had filled his own soul were gone. And he found himself wanting to tell someone else about his discovery, his new life of obedience and freedom. The Christian who had spoken to him had been transferred to another camp, so the doctor waited for the right man and the right moment. And before long he found that man, a patient recovering from cancer surgery, a young man whose face betrayed already the years he had spent in the camps. All through the afternoon and into the night he told this young man, now suffering from a fever, of his conversion to Christ and his new found freedom and passion for mercy and justice.

Near the end he said this: **“On the whole, you know, I have become convinced that there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved. Superficially, it can have nothing to do with what we are guilty of in actual fact, but if you go over your life with a fine-tooth comb and ponder it deeply, you will always be able to hunt down that transgression of yours for which you have now received this blow.”** Imagine that. A Jew who had thought of himself the innocent victim of the cruelty of others, now confessing that he had suffered only according to his own deserts. The patient knew that he was hearing an astonishing and deeply important confession.

The patient woke up the next morning to the sound of running feet, of commotion in the operating area not far away. He wondered why the doctor did not return to his bedside and soon, from other prisoners, he learned the truth. During the night, while the doctor slept, someone had hit him on the head eight times with a mallet. The other doctors tried to save him, but to no avail.

The only way we know this story is that the name of the patient, who heard Kornfeld’s confession the night before his murder was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The Lord saw fit to have Kornfeld’s testimony written down and published to the world. Otherwise what he learned the hard way would never have gone further than one man, who may or may not have passed it on. But one man, is better than no one at all.. praise God for his witness and the unnamed and unknown Christian in the camp who shared Christ with Kornfeld. Alexander Solzhenitsyn became a believer as a result of hearing Kornfeld’s testimony: it changed his life just as the Christian who spoke to Kornfeld, changed his life.

That insight of Kornfeld’s was precisely what escaped Israel in Micah’s day. They did not understand that it was their own sins that had brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem’s gates. And they did not see themselves as sinners needing divine grace, because they were incapable themselves of satisfying the demands of God’s holy justice. For that reason they never experienced the liberating power of God’s grace nor did they become gracious themselves, merciful, or humble.

Salvation by God’s grace makes you gracious; the experience of God’s mercy makes you merciful; the knowledge of divine justice being satisfied for you by God’s own righteousness in Christ, makes you humble. It must. It is a fixed and unchangeable law.

Israel got salvation wrong and so she got life wrong. Let us, brothers and sisters, never make her mistake. Let us acknowledge always grace of our most merciful God. Let us judge our grasp of that grace by the measure of its presence in our treatment of others. Titus 3: 1-7 restates what God requires of us, and tells us why we are saved by grace and not by works or our own righteousness.

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, ²to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone. ³At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

We cannot delegate being just, kind, and merciful to someone else. We cannot pay someone else to be just, kind and merciful, whether through taxes, insurances or our own money, so that we don't have to be just, kind and merciful ourselves. We cannot outsource humility! Like Boris Kornfeld, we all have to do what is right because it cost Jesus His life to clothe us in His righteousness and be able to stand before our holy God. Whatever it costs us, we as individuals must be just, kind and merciful. If we do this, loving God and loving one another, we will reveal to others the nature of Jesus to all those we come into contact with. We are so blessed to have Holy Spirit guide us to be Christlike and to be His witnesses.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, from whom all mercy flows, we humbly thank you for all your gifts so freely given: for life and health and safety, for work and rest and friendship, and for the wonder of creation. We thank you for preserving throughout history a people for yourself. We thank you for Your living Word and the revelation of your love for us. Above all, we praise you for our Saviour Jesus Christ, for his death and resurrection, for your life-giving Spirit, and the hope of sharing in your glory. Fill our hearts with love, joy and peace; strengthen our faith; give us wisdom as we grow as disciples and open our eyes to see others as You see them. Enable us to be just, kind and humble, as we receive with gladness Your grace and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.