

Scripture Readings for Sunday Dec 23, 2018.

Micah 5:2-5a

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, and he will be our peace.”

Luke 1:46-55.

⁴⁶ And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Sermon: “Do We *Want* A Saviour?”

“It was a game of two halves” is a well-known soccer expression and when you first hear the phrase, it seems silly, since *all* soccer games have two halves! Pundits use it to describe a match in which the team’s fortunes were reversed after half-time; in the first half, one team was doing all the attacking and may well have been leading three goals to nil before the break. The expectation, therefore, is for the second half to be more of the same and that the losing team will be totally humiliated. But something must have happened in the dressing room at half-time. Whatever the manager said, and he likely also substituted a player or two, the losing team came out in the second half, changed their tactics, and totally dominated the play, eventually to win the match four-three in the closing minutes! That kind of game is always a thrill to watch – as long as you’re not a supporter of the losing team! The Bible is a little like that, in that we have two Testaments which, in many respects, are very different and yet are intimately connected. Just as there is only *one* soccer match, so there is *one* God who is behind *all* of history, even if there are two very distinct phases of events.

Our Old Testament reading today came from Micah and is a well-known reading for Christmastime. But who was Micah? And what was the context of his prophecy? Let’s begin there this morning, as today’s

sermon will contain two halves – using *both* our Old and New Testament readings. And at the end I will highlight some connections between them – but listen carefully and identify them for yourselves!

Micah was active in the southern Kingdom of Judah between about 725-700 BC.¹ Historians tell us that many in Judah suffered displacement and economic hardship after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. To keep the conquering Assyrians out, the rulers of Judah paid them taxes for several generations, and evidently passed on those expenses to the poor in one way or another. Even so, they continued to live under constant threat of a foreign military invasion. At the same time, wealthy landowners thrived and grew their vast estates at the expense of small peasant farmers, and so the gap between the rich and poor increased greatly. This scenario sounds very familiar and has been repeated throughout history; we live today with economic uncertainty and under imposed trade agreements. And the gap between the rich and poor has never been bigger.

Micah was appalled at such injustice; he knew God did not rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt to live like this. So, he spoke out against the corrupt political, financial, and religious leaders in Jerusalem. He exposed their injustice and warned of divine judgement – including the unimaginable, the destruction of Jerusalem itself,² something which occurred a century or so later in 586 BC.³ Micah railed against the leaders of his day because they had abandoned their divinely-ordained responsibility to exercise social justice and care for *all* the people.⁴ “God does not accept this state of affairs,” said Micah, “and he will send a leader to put things right.” However, this new leader will come from surprising place and will rule in an astonishing way.⁵

The place is Bethlehem,⁶ and the smallness of the town and the insignificance of its people are contrasted with the bright lights of Jerusalem and its urban elite. Once again, the people are reminded of the humble beginnings of their great King David. David not only came from Bethlehem, he was also the *youngest* son of Jesse.⁷ It was well-known even at this point in the nation’s history that God chooses unlikely people to do great things. For example, just hear again what Gideon, centuries earlier, exclaimed to the angel, “Pardon me, sir, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the *weakest* in Manasseh, and I am the *least* in my family.”⁸ We could Hollywood-ise such a line by imagining Sean Connery uttering those words, but then we would miss the point! God often deliberately chooses someone who *we* would probably dismiss as the most unlikely candidate for carrying out his mission. Why? Because God knows that status, power, wealth, and influence can become a distraction from utter dependence

¹ He was a contemporary of Hosea in the North and (1st) Isaiah in the South. “Micah” is an abbreviated form of an expression of praise meaning “Who is like YHWH?” Is quite likely that he ministered in Jerusalem, although he come from the countryside and therefore was not a member of the urban elite (unlike Isaiah).

² Mic 3:9-12.

³ The later prophet, Jeremiah, reminds the people of Micah’s oracle; Jer 26:18–19.

⁴ Some time seems to have passed because, in Mic 4:9-10, the people are about to be taken out of the city to deportation camps and then into exile in Babylon, from where the Lord will rescue them once again - as he did from Egypt.

⁵ As Dr Martin Luther King Jr, put it, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but bends towards justice.”

⁶ “Ephrathah” is the name of the clan of people who lived in the area of Bethlehem; see Ruth 1:2, 1 Sam 17:12.

⁷ 1 Sam 16:11-13.

⁸ Judges 6:15; recall too that King Saul was from an insignificant tribe, Benjamin (1 Sam 9:21).

upon him. All this reminds me of a small hobbit called Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*! It should also remind us all of a baby in a manger.

Going back to Micah, he proclaimed a message that I believe is as true today as it was 2700 years ago, “Yes, this present time remains one of suffering, and it may get worse before relief comes, but don’t lose heart. God is still at work and moving us from suffering to salvation.”⁹ “God is going to raise up a new leader who will,” Micah said, “shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD . . . and everyone will live securely . . . and he shall be the one of peace.”¹⁰ The new leader will be like the Good Shepherd¹¹ bringing peace and security to all, which was the *opposite* of what the people were currently experiencing. He will act on God’s behalf¹² and will find his strength and authority from the LORD,¹³ *not* from within himself.

As you have probably surmised, this passage is often referred to as a “messianic text” even although the word “Messiah” is never used. That word “messianic” is used to describe the Jewish hope for a new leader who will come from the family of David to rescue God’s people from oppression and suffering, and put the world to right. This allusion to David and his father Jesse allows *us* to make a further connection with Isaiah, a contemporary of Micah, who prophesied: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge; he will honour the LORD—and he will delight in obeying him.”¹⁴

700 years later, while under Roman oppression in the 1st century AD, many Jews still looked for such a Messiah and texts like these encouraged this expectation among the people. Matthew makes mention of it when the wise men visit King Herod looking for Jesus.¹⁵ Was Micah’s oracle ever fulfilled, apart from in Jesus Christ? No. If we are talking about an earthly ruler, then from after the return from the Babylonian exile right up until the present time, this has *not* happened. Nevertheless, when you pull all such messianic texts together, it is hard to simply dismiss them - and Christians obviously see them as referring to Jesus.

Let’s now pivot the New Testament reading - to the 2nd half of today’s sermon.

The song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, is Luke’s clever way of introducing a broader theological theme that is *continuous* with the Old Testament prophets and foreshadows the *kind* of person Mary’s son will become. I’ll say more about that in a moment, because, first, we cannot overlook the fact that Mary song also echoes that of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, which similarly begins, “My heart rejoices in

⁹ Mic 4:10,12; 5:3. Incidentally, the mother in 5:3 needs to be seen more in the context of 4:9-10, than of Mary!

¹⁰ Mic 5:4-5a.

¹¹ The King as a shepherd was a common metaphor, not just for a king, but also of God (Ps 23, Isa 40:11; Jer 23:3-4). And the ruling “to the ends of the earth” is well-known from the royal psalms which describe the future ruler be an ideal Davidic King (see Pss 2:8; 72:8.) See also John 10:11-18.

¹² See the “for me” in Mic 5:2. (The Hebrew word for “king” is not used here, rather more general word for “ruler.”)

¹³ Mic 5:4.

¹⁴ Isa 11:1-3a; see also Isa 9:6-7. Incidentally, no mention of Isaiah is made in the book of Micah.

¹⁵ Matt 2:5-6.

the Lord!”¹⁶ Both women burst forth in joyful praise and both songs portray contrasting comparisons and the reversal of social fortunes. At a time when the rich and powerful seem to get away with murder and make the rules to suit themselves, Mary proclaims that God has stepped in and acted. “He has scattered those who are proud, and has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”¹⁷ Now let’s hear the words of Hannah: “The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more.”¹⁸ We can recognise in both songs, amongst other things, a sense of irony and a passion for social justice; we can also hear an echo of Micah. No, those who abuse their power won’t always get away with it! Because the God who abhors injustice is doing a new thing. And this new thing doesn’t arise out of Jerusalem (or Ottawa or Toronto) but from a teenage pregnancy to a humble, rural-peasant girl from nowhere special – from Bethlehem, just as Micah had said.¹⁹ No one was expecting that, just as no one expected Samuel to pick the shepherd boy, David, to be the next king.²⁰ Again, don’t expect God to do the obvious, especially when what we call “obvious” is based on our perceptions of power and wisdom.

So what *kind* of person will Mary’s son become? Luke spells it out when Jesus begins his ministry in Nazareth, saying: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”²¹ Jesus later announces “blessings” on those whose lives are defined by poverty, hunger, and suffering, and warnings of “woe” to those who are affluent.²² Again, this echoes Micah’s message. All this goes to show that God is a revolutionary God, and points to Jesus is God’s chosen agent – the longed-for Messiah. In Christ’s teaching and miracles, he scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts with a *moral* revolution. He brings down the mighty and exalts the humble with a *social* revolution. He fills those who are hungry while those who are rich are sent empty away in his *economic* revolution. That’s the kind of person Jesus will grow up to be – and he has changed world history. And God is *not* done yet!²³

In bringing these two readings together, one of the key connections between Micah and Mary is *the need of a saviour*. Micah prophesied a leader would come and bring about peace – *shalom*. While our world still longs for the absence of war, *shalom* is much more than that. Living in peace means in a right

¹⁶ 1 Sam 2:1 and Luke 1:46. Hannah and Mary would both agree: “There is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God,” (1 Sam 2:2). Furthermore, one cannot ignore the Song of Miriam (Moses’ and Aaron’s sister – and Mary’s namesake) in Exod 15:1-18, which begins: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted” and ends, “The LORD reigns for ever and ever.”

¹⁷ Luke 1:51-53.

¹⁸ 1 Sam 2:4-5.

¹⁹ Regardless of the original meaning of Micah’s prophecy, Matt 2:3-6 indicates that the 1st century expectation was that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

²⁰ 1 Sam 16:1-13.

²¹ Luke 4:18-29; this is a quote from Isa 61:1,2 (LXX); 58:6. Luke (if not Jesus himself) makes this connection with 2nd Isaiah.

²² Luke 6:20–26.

²³ Mary’s song is both beautiful and subversive; in Luke’s hands it is political dynamite! Mary confidently proclaims that what God has done for her, he will do for the poor, the powerless, the oppressed of the world - and this is one of Luke’s key themes within his gospel. The song not only speaks of justice, but also celebrates God’s goodness, faithfulness, and mercy.

relationship with God, with each other, and with all of creation. And Christians believe that Jesus inaugurated that *shalom* with his life, death and resurrection – and we have faith in a good and faithful God who will complete what Jesus started. Going back to the soccer analogy, we are in the second half and are playing our hearts out confident that victory is assured! Mary sings for joy because *she* is confident that God is *her* Saviour.²⁴

What about us? Do we share in her joy and confidence? That is an interesting question, but perhaps we should first ask: Do *we need* a Saviour? Do *we want* a Saviour? The word “saviour” expresses the desperate need of the poor, the oppressed, the lonely, and the hungry. They need a Rescuer because their need is greater than their strength or capability to change their circumstances. However, those who have power, influence, means, and the privilege of position have no need to seek help from others. And the proud won’t want to seek help from others.

Churchgoers often bemoan the decline in church attendance that all the Western mainline-denominations have experienced over the last 60 years. It is a complex and well-studied issue. I think a significant part of this demise is that our culture doesn’t think it needs a Saviour, and hence Jesus is increasingly seen as irrelevant by many. This is especially true for both the very wealthy and the comfortable middle class. Most of us have some sort of social safety net, such as healthcare, benefits, pensions, savings, and insurances of various kinds, that was unheard of in previous centuries, let alone in biblical times. And anesthetics and pain-killers protect us from harsh reality of suffering, at least to a degree. It is only when our routines are invaded by uncertainty and insecurity, to the point that we are no longer feel “in control” of our personal choices and destiny, that God is even considered. Religious faith is, for some, the last “insurance policy”—a desperate hope when all else fails. Moreover, many today dismiss that our lives are part of a bigger narrative – the kind of overarching divine story that both Micah and Mary believed in. Instead, there is a belief in *personal* autonomy and moral independence; we have made ourselves – as individuals - the arbiter of truth and values. We have therefore made ourselves ‘gods.’ In soccer terms, we don’t want to be managed by anybody; we want to manage ourselves!

We may think of ourselves as sophisticated and enlightened, but take a closer, honest look at our country and our world. We may not think we personally need rescuing, but our world sure does! And even if we scratch at the surface of *our own* lives, we will find that we harbor stress, anxiety, fear, regret, bitterness, resentment, angst, and a range of other negative emotions and attitudes that hold us in captivity. We are not always as free as we wish we were.²⁵

So, I ask again: Do we *need* a Saviour? Do we *want* a Saviour? The point is simple: If we don’t, we can’t share in Micah’s hope or Mary’s joy. I believe the world *continues* to need a Saviour. We need rescuing from ourselves, as individuals and as a society.

²⁴ Luke 1:46.

²⁵ Jesus put it this way: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Mark 2:17. See also Luke 5:32; 19:10; Matt 9:13.

To profess along with Mary that “God is our Saviour” means that we will *not* look for some other power or rescuer to liberate us from the chaos that we find ourselves in, much of which humanity has created. Our hope is not, *ultimately*, in new technology, or social progress, or more research and better education, or in legal reform, or in political solutions; these things – *important though they undoubtedly are* – *will not in themselves* deliver us from the various forms of degradation that are rampant in our society, or from the pervading sense of meaninglessness within secular worldviews. Of course, God can - and does - make use any of those processes, just as God can use the medical profession as a means of our healing, but the foundation of our trust is in *God as our saviour* and therefore our *primary* loyalty and worship is to him. That is what Mary is celebrating! And humility and gratitude are the proper responses to God’s goodness and grace.

I began by talking of a “game of two halves.” Micah was God’s messenger in the first half – and things got much worse for Jews despite his prophetic warnings. God changed his tactics in the second half; he did the most unexpected thing yet. He came himself in the human form of Jesus, as a vulnerable baby laid in a manger at Bethlehem. In soccer language, God became a “player-manager”; he substituted himself and is playing on the pitch! That dramatic change in the second half *has* made – and *will* make - all the difference to the final outcome. God is *still* at work and he invites us to join in and play on his team. Amen.²⁶

²⁶ An optional (additional) ending: “Finally, during Advent, we light the Candles of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. We can see the hope for a coming time of peace in Micah’s oracle, and overflowing joy and adoration in Mary’s song. Let us join in that journey from hope to love as we actively long and work for Christ’s coming. Amen.”