

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

RCL Readings – Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

ACNA Readings – Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 37:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction. The biblical concept of a kingdom is different from the modern worldview which tends to think of kingdoms as locations with borders, flags, and national identities. The Hebraic perspective is that a kingdom is a sphere of influence, much less a geographical location, in which the will of the king is supreme. The king in this case is, of course, God who made heaven and earth. In one sense the kingdom of heaven is the entire universe. But more than that, the kingdom of heaven is wherever God is ruling and reigning in the lives of those who profess belief and allegiance to him, for both in heaven and on earth there are those who refuse the lordship of God.

Common Theme. Jesus is Messiah, Redeemer, Lord, and King. We show that Jesus is our king, not only by believing him to be so but by actively giving him our obedience. The word obedience can often invoke heart palpitations in many Protestants who equate obedience with works-righteousness. Our readings today confirm that faith is much more than simply belief in God. Faith in Hebrew is a verbal noun and implies a practical outward expressing of something internally believed. Let's remember that even demons believe!

Micah 6:1-8. God asks the question of Israel: “How have I burdened you?” That could easily be paraphrased as *what have I done to make you upset that you stopped obeying me?* It's not that Israel had stopped believing that God existed; it's that they had stopped following the commandments of the Lord. In contrast, God had never stopped being faithful to his promises or the covenant he had made with the patriarchs. God had protected, nurtured, and provided for his people, and now he wanted to know why the Israelites had forsaken their side of the covenant. Micah summarises the expectations of what the Lord required of his people, and this has become a summary of the entire spirit of the Torah. When God rules and reigns in our lives we are to act justly – or do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord. The spirit of the Torah leads to actions and not thoughts.

Some translations of Micah 6:8 say to love *mercy* while others use *kindness*. Many words in Hebrew both convey and have more than one meaning. The word *hesed* חֶסֶד is translated by the King James Version as *mercy*, an interesting choice as the word for *mercy* in Hebrew is *rechemim* רַחֲמִים and is in the plural. *Hesed* can be translated as *loving-kindness* or *unfailing love* as it is in Exodus 15:13. It also has the notion of faithfulness and loyalty as in Ruth 1:8, where it is translated as *kindness* in the context of Ruth's loyalty towards Naomi. The word *hesed* is always used in the context of action; something is done or being done. It is not works-righteousness in the sense of working towards a reward or goal (e.g. salvation) but rather a responsive outworking of knowing the will of God.

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Psalm 15. This short meditation by the unnamed ‘conductor’ to David¹ is a psalm about the character of the person who desires the presence of the Lord. The question pondered is not: does the person believe or not believe in God? Yes, they do believe in God! Otherwise, there would be no desire to seek God’s presence in the first place. The person who may dwell with the Lord is the person who walks uprightly and does what is righteous. Access to the Lord is not solely through sacrifices or ritual purity but through the application of moral character. Faith in God is something you do on a daily basis, which by the way might actually include sacrifice (cf. Ps 51:19). It springs from the heart, from where Moses says you should love God, and not from the knowledge of your head. The psalm contains a short listing of a few practical applications of moral character. The deeds of righteousness include truthful speech and control of the tongue, loving your neighbour and using economic wealth in the appropriate way. Whoever does these things shall not be moved or withdrawn from the presence of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31. The gospel of salvation through Jesus the Messiah has been the source of much controversy since the resurrection. Paul summarises it eloquently as foolishness to the secular world and the power of God to those being saved. Interestingly both the “perishing” and those “being saved” are verbal participles in the present tense. That tense describes a work in progress as the ultimate fate of each group has not yet been decided. Paul then quotes the prophet Isaiah and introduces the subject of wisdom (*Sophia* σοφία) which was a primary intellectual concern for the Greek world but also a significant word in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Hebraic perspective, wisdom involves the application of knowledge to guide daily life. The wise have to be able to apply the truth in a tangible way. In the Greek world, Sophists (from the root word *Sophia*) used their rhetorical skill of speech to both entertain and manipulate listeners towards their teachings and even charged fees for doing so. Greek human wisdom could not wrap its head around the concept of a divine being dying through such a horrible execution as crucifixion. For Jewish people, the death of any messianic character indicated failure, not success. The modern secular world does not understand the ancient sacrificial system or the need for atonement of personal sin and thus the death of Jesus continues to make no sense. Jesus did not stay dead, however, and the resurrection is the sign that proves the good news of Jesus to be true.

Matthew 5:1-12. Matthew 5 to 7 is a well-known passage of Scripture usually titled The Sermon on the Mount. It is not really a sermon as such. Rather Matthew collates a series of teachings of Jesus to form a lengthy instructive narrative. The Beatitudes, which constitute the beginning of the sermon, are more of a summary of the fundamental teachings of Jesus. Luke’s version, sometimes called The Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6, is shorter but includes woes as well as blessings and indicates that Jesus probably gave this teaching several times and in various locations.

¹ While the lexicons define מְזַמֵּר (*mizmor*) as *psalm* or *melody*, the group of rabbis that I study with note that sometimes the psalm says “Mizmor L'David” or “David L'Mizmor” One reading is that David also writes psalms to a person called a Mizmor. So, some Jewish readers understand Mizmor as being a person (similar to מְנַצֵּחַ *menatzeach*). Hence, “David to Conductor” or “Conductor to David.”

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Jesus' primary audience for the Sermon on the Mount is not the crowds of verse 1. Jesus' response to seeing the crowds is to go up a mountain. The initial primary listeners are actually his disciples, who would then carry the words and teachings of Jesus to the crowds themselves. Jesus sits down to teach, which is the classic position of all teachers in Jewish tradition. We see him also sit to teach in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4. You stand to read the Scriptures and you sit to teach.

Traditionally there are eight Beatitudes, although a form of the word *blessed* (μακάριοι) actually occurs nine times in this passage. The usual understanding is that the ninth *blessed* in verse 11 is an enlargement of the *blessed* in verse 10 and what it means to endure persecution for the sake of the gospel. The Beatitudes are all practical out-workings of faith in action. There is no: Blessed are they who believe in God! The assumption is that all those listening are listening because they already believe. In a very broad sense, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is not made up of powerful militaries or dominated by the wealthy class. The kingdom of heaven is expressed through actions of meekness, humbleness, and mercy. Like the passage we read in Micah 6:8, this truly is the spirit of the Torah. Note that later in Matthew 7:21 Jesus concludes the sermon by declaring that the true disciple is the one who “does the will of my Father” and not who simply believes in the Father.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 37:1-11. What does it mean to trust in the Lord? Psalm 37 is a treasure trove of teaching on what it means to apply trust in the Lord. In the psalm, we find that trust is

- looking to God and doing good (v. 3),
- delighting in the Lord and desiring the things of God (v. 4) leading us to commit our way to the Lord (v. 5),
- being patient and not worrying when the evil-doers appear to be successful (v. 7) and refraining from an angry and wrathful response to the world around us (v. 8).

In all this we acknowledge that this psalm describes faith in action. These are not spiritual principles in which to only ponder in the mind but to actively live them out in faith and hope.

Verse 11 appears as the source for one of the Beatitudes where the meek shall inherit the earth. What the meek inherit is עֶרֶץ (*eretz*), which can mean *land* or *earth*. In Matthew 5:11, the word for earth is γῆ (*ge*), which can also mean *land*. The first time *eretz* is used is in Genesis 1:1 and speaks of the earth, not the land of Israel. As the psalms are usually universal in the scope of salvation, I would tend to side with the interpretation that *eretz* here in Psalm 37 is universal and thus should be rendered as *earth*.

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Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.