

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Micah 6:1–8, 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 & Matthew 5:1–12

You may not have paid too much attention to the “sandwich board” or A-frame sign outside the church, which lets people know that the church is open and that they are welcome to come in, but there is a verse from the Bible that appears right at the very bottom of the sign. It says: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

If it sounds familiar, that’s probably because you heard in our first reading this morning from the Book of Micah. We rarely encounter the Book of Micah in the three year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, so I wouldn’t be surprised that people aren’t acquainted with the book.

Micah was a prophet in the 8th century BCE, and he delivered prophecies about the fall of the northern tribes of Israel, and the invasion of Judah. In today’s reading, Micah, speaking on behalf of God, reminds the people that God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, appointed leaders to guide them, and protected them from the Moabites. And He asked only one thing in return. He didn’t ask them for burnt offerings, or sin offerings, or any other form of sacrifice. He asked only that they “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with Him”.

This means that God wanted them to actively promote justice, to passionately devote themselves to the good of others, and to humbly submit themselves to His standards in all areas of their lives. This was the form of sacrifice He expected from the people, and Jesus provides the perfect example of this sacrifice through his own life and teaching, as indeed we heard earlier from today’s gospel reading.

Today’s passage was of course the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. Unlike the Book of Micah, we are probably all very familiar with the Beatitudes. In fact, we might even be too familiar with them, familiar to the point that as soon as we hear the opening verse, we might stop paying attention to the verses that follow because we think we know them so well.

So let’s listen closely to them: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

There’s no mention of the wealthy being blessed, or the powerful, or those of important social status, or those who are incredibly popular on social media, with

hundreds of friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter and Instagram. The Beatitudes were just as counter-cultural in the time of Jesus as they are in our day. But Jesus wasn't really saying anything new, because the people whom Jesus describes in the Beatitudes as being blessed, would probably have been people who "did justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with God", just as Micah encouraged them to do hundreds of years before.

The Apostle Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, describes the counter-cultural aspect of Jesus' death on the cross when he says, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God". The 'message of the cross' is of course that the prophecies about the Jewish Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus, and that through his life, death and resurrection, the Kingdom of God has been established on earth.

For those who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah (both Jew and Gentile), this was foolishness. After all, how could Jesus have possibly been the Messiah if he suffered and died on the cross! Of course for those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, his resurrection was proof of the power of God; proof that God has power over sin, death and the forces of evil.

Today, as in the time of Jesus, people who don't believe in God, or that Jesus is the Son of God, still regard as foolishness the Christian belief that God was incarnate in Jesus, and that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead after three days. If the resurrection of Jesus is the proof of God's power, what is the proof of the Resurrection itself?

One answer is Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. What would make a man like Paul, who was a devout Jew and the most committed persecutor of the Christian Church, suddenly switch sides and become its chief messenger, risking both persecution and death to spread the good news of the Gospel to non-Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire?

Likewise, what would make the apostles of Jesus, those who deserted him in fear of their own lives, suddenly return to Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified, and begin publicly proclaiming at the risk of their own death, that he was in fact the Son of God? It can only be that each of these people witnessed Jesus risen from the dead.

The message about the cross might still be counter-cultural today, as might be the teaching of Jesus as communicated through the Beatitudes today, but it's a reinforcement and reminder of the way that God wants us to live our lives: To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with Him.