

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Micah 6:1-8

^{6:1} Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² 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. ³ "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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." ⁶ "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? ⁷ 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?" ⁸ 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?

Commentary

Micah was roughly contemporary with Isaiah. He was a fearless champion of the oppressed and under-privileged, who attacked the socio-economic injustice of his day: wealthy capitalists oppressed peasant landowners. The scene for today's reading is a lawcourt ("plead your case"). Israel is on trial for contravening the Sinai covenant; the witnesses are the whole cosmos: the "mountains ... hills" and "foundations of the earth" (v. 2). (The earth was thought to stand on pillars.) God has a *bone to pick* ("controversy", lawsuit) with Israel ("his people") for forgetting that he has saved her in the past and for not walking in his ways. He speaks in vv. 3-5: what more could I have done? I cared for you and protected you. I delivered you from slavery in "Egypt" (v. 4); I gave you great leaders. Recall how when, during the Exodus, after you defeated the Amorites, I stymied Balak's (v. 5) devious scheme: he hired the prophet "Balaam" to curse you, but he blessed Israel! I gave you safe passage across the Jordan. ("Shittim" was Israel's last camping place before crossing and "Gilgal" the first on the west bank of the river.) I saved then, and I will do so again.

In v. 6, Israel, the defendant, pleads her case: God, what can we do to make amends for our infidelity? Will you be pleased with sacrifices, especially "burnt offerings" (which were total,

because nothing was left for consumption by the priests) of “calves” (which were especially valuable)? Would repeated offerings of rams and of oil (used in the liturgy for lamps, sacred anointings and purification) satisfy you? Should we sacrifice our eldest sons (as Canaanites do)? Perhaps Micah speaks in v. 8: no, God requires internal conversion and a proper spiritual attitude. He has told you what he expects: to be godly, (“to do justice ... to love kindness”), to hold him in proper respect and to walk in his ways.

Reflection

In this an exchange between the plaintiff (the Lord) and the defendant (Israel), it turns out that the suit could have been settled out of court. God doesn't want us to do “religious” things for him so much as he wants us to be just and kind in our dealings with each other, and humble of heart towards him. How easy is that for you? Do you sometimes feel that you try to please God?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

^{1:18} 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. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. ²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Commentary

The “message” of Christ crucified, risen and alive is God’s power to us, but to those who hear the good news and reject “the cross” it is nonsense. This, Paul says, God prophesied through Isaiah (v. 19). He has decried divisions in the church at Corinth; he now recognizes two groups of humans: the “wise” (v. 19) and “those who believe” (v. 21). Are, he asks rhetorically, the Jewish “scribe” (v. 20) and the rationalist (“debater”) – both possessors of worldly wisdom – truly wise? Through the coming of Christ, God has shown worldly wisdom to be folly, for one can’t “know God through wisdom”, i.e. in a philosophical way. *Knowing God is experiential.* In

fact, God chose to save believers through the apparent folly of what Paul preaches (“our proclamation”). To “demand signs” (miracles, v. 22) is to refuse to trust in God; “Jews” refused Christ due to their particular expectations in a messiah. To “desire wisdom” is to construct a religion whose demands one is prepared to accept. (The “Greeks” in v. 22 are unbelieving *non-Jews*.) God’s ways are not human ways (v. 25).

Consider yourselves, Christians at Corinth (v. 26): few of you are what *the world* would have chosen: few are *worldly wise*, “powerful” or aristocratic. But God’s way is to choose those of apparently little account (“foolish”, “weak”, v. 27) to show the apparently important that they are wrong, to “shame” them. This is God’s paradoxical way (v. 28); he does away with boasting. Christ’s living in human form started a new way of being human (v. 30): we are set apart for his purposes (“sanctification”) and no longer controlled by evil (“redemption”) so that we become one with God (“righteousness”) – so that we can (as God commanded through Jeremiah) “boast in the Lord” (v. 31). Christ is true wisdom.

Reflection

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Paul asks. What does it mean to you to be a “fool for Christ”? The “world” often condemns people of faith, after all. Do you ever feel disparaged and looked down upon as a believer in Christ?

Matthew 5:1-12

^{5:1} When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Commentary

Jesus ascends a mountain in Galilee where he speaks to his “disciples”, his followers, in the Sermon on the Mount – but the “crowds” hear too: see 7:28, the end of the Sermon. He speaks of the new era he has come to initiate. Verses 3-12 are known as the Beatitudes, from the Latin for *blessed*. To be “blessed” is to be happy. All the qualities are expected of the faithful, for the consequence is the same: they will enjoy God’s end-time rule. In fact, the Kingdom has already begun, but it not yet completed. They will attain (and are attaining) eternal life.

The “poor in spirit” (v. 3) are probably detached from wealth and dependent on God alone. Those who “mourn” (v. 4) the reign of evil forces on earth will be “comforted” and strengthened in the Kingdom. The “meek” (v. 5), people who do not press for personal advantage, will share in God’s rule. Those who “hunger” (v. 6, who ardently pursue God’s will and purpose for his people), and do so single-mindedly and sincerely, “the pure in heart” (v. 8), will come to know God intimately (“see God”). The “merciful” (v. 7) are those who pardon and love others (especially the poor). The “peacemakers” (v. 9), those who seek *shalom*, the total state of well-being God provides through Christ, “will be called children of God”, for they share in God’s work. Finally vv. 10-12: those spreading the good news, striving to reconcile the world to God, will be persecuted because of the message they carry (as were the Old Testament “prophets”). They too should “rejoice and be glad” for God will reward them. Jesus tells his audience that the values for admission to the Kingdom are the reverse of those valued by materialists.

Reflection

Like the contrast between what people want to do for God and what God really wants in Micah, and the difference between worldly “wisdom” and God’s “foolishness” in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the Beatitudes are founded on a reversal of expectations. Who in the world would ever call the spiritually bereft, the grieving, and the meek “blessed” or “happy”? Jesus does: do you?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 15

^{15:1} O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?

² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;

³ who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;

⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

⁵ who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.