

## Bible Notes: Micah 6

**Sunday July 28<sup>th</sup>, 7.30pm in the Breakspear Room: how have you found the prophet Micah? What has been inspirational, troubling, confusing? Any and all reactions welcome!**

Overview: Chapters Four and Five have largely focussed on the future, looking first at the new kingdom promised by God and then at the figure who would one day bring this about. Chapter Six turns its attention back to the present (that is, of course, to the present-day of Judah about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!). One of the classic devices in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures is that of the trial scene, where the people are summoned (6:1-2) as if to court to settle matters between them and God. 6:3-4 is then God's indictment of the people: He asks them to remember what He did for them in the time of the Exodus and the settlement of the land (Balak, for instance, was the king of Moab whose thwarted attempt to curse and destroy Israel is reported in Numbers 22). Then, by implication, they are asked to consider how their behaviour can be justified in the light of that history: how can the God who has done so much for them be so disregarded?

6:6-8 shifts the focus somewhat: we should perhaps imagine not so much a courtroom as the crowded forecourt of the Temple. The prophet imagines the various ways in which the people might think they can atone for their sins, offering sacrifice in an ascending order of costliness (6:7 is an undoubted reference to *human* sacrifice, and there is some evidence that this was practised in some forms of ancient Near East religion and that it may have occasionally featured in Israelite practice). But God, says Micah, has made it clear what offering he requires: 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.'

6:9-16 returns to God's indictment of the people, and as in earlier chapters of Micah the emphasis is upon crimes involving wealth and violence (indeed, 'your wealthy are full of violence' 6:12). Micah believes that much wealth has been accumulated through deceit – through the use of scales that weigh falsely, and through sellers offering 'scant measure' in return for excessive prices. The whole social structure, he judges, is built on theft and lies. In

consequence, people will not truly enjoy their riches even now, and one day the whole rotten edifice will come crashing down.

6:6-8 is one of those passages which it would be a very good idea to memorise and meditate upon frequently! It sums up beautifully a central aspect of the message preached by many of the Hebrew prophets, which is that what God really wants to see is the transformation of people's hearts. He is not especially concerned (which is not the same thing as saying he is utterly *unconcerned*) with what they do in terms of public worship. He is not even overly impressed with tremendously sacrificial giving – tens of thousands of rivers of oil would be an astonishingly generous gift, comparable to one of us giving millions and millions of pounds to the church. Such giving of course is a Very Good Thing (vicars have to say that), and radical generosity is part of being a believer. However, what is crucial to realise is that we must not be generous because we think that in being so, we can buy God's approval or love. There isn't enough money in the world for that. No, all God requires is something at one level much less expensive, at another much more costly: that we should 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.'

That is not actually a bad definition of the Kingdom of God, and of what we mean when – as in our MAP – we speak of 'going deeper into God, making new disciples, and transforming communities.' The life we're inviting people into, and which we seek to live ourselves, is one about living in obedience friendship with God and acting with justice and kindness in the world. Note that justice and kindness are not quite the same thing: it is possible to be scrupulously just and to work for justice without actually loving the people involved, without having compassion for them. That's why the pursuit of justice for the masses can sometimes be exceptionally cruel to many, many individuals. God does not want hard-hearted, cold-eyed revolutionaries pursuing the 'greatest good of the greatest number'. He wants us to regard all his creatures as He regards them – with love. Although, as Micah has shown us repeatedly throughout these chapters, to love someone can certainly involve raging fiercely against them – when their behaviour, like Judah's, threatens to steer them and all around them into disaster.