

Those of you who have been coming regularly over the past weeks will know that in my homilies I have been hiding out, so to speak, in the Gospels. You will also recall that I have often given assurances at the beginning of my homily that I am not going to speak to the reading from the Hebrew scripture because of the subject matter. Last week for example, was a passage from Hosea that began with tales of whoredom and adultery. Not exactly a foundation for proclaiming the Good News. But this evening I have lost my refuge from the Hebrew Scripture. Our passage from Matthew deals with the call of Matthew himself. It differs little from the passage from Mark we read on July 16th on which I preached. I am afraid that I have little to add. Matthew was a reviled tax collector, but in one of many acts of radical inclusion, Jesus called him to “follow me”. Like the passage from Mark, Jesus gets in trouble with the Pharisees for consorting and eating with outcasts and sinners. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus responds with, “the well have no need of a physician.” I really have nothing more I can add expect perhaps to draw your attention to the immediacy of Matthew’s and the other disciples’ acceptance of the call. They drop everything and follow Jesus.

So with nothing further really to say about the Gospel passage, I am forced to turn to our reading from Micah. Micah is one of the prophets described as “minor” of whom there are 12: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Micah. They are described as minor not to signify that there are less important than the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Rather the term minor refers to the relative shortness of their writing compared to the major prophets. For example in the NRSV Micah takes up 5 pages while Isaiah takes up 52 and Jeremiah 49. The minor prophets are of equal importance.

In Deuteronomy God says: *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.* So the prophets were regarded as the mouth piece of God. They were there to admonish, to instruct, and to predict the nature of salvation and the nature of consequences. The prophets were regarded as uniquely open to the receipt of wisdom from the Divine and to be uniquely equipped to communicate it to the people.

So what do we know about Micah. We know he was from Moresheth-Gath in south-west Judea. He lived in a rural area and often condemned the corruption that he saw endemic in Jerusalem. Micah was an active prophet from 740 BCE to 698 BCE. He predicted the destruction in Judea by the Assyrian invasion in 701 BCE including the unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. Micah predated the Babylonian captivity by more than 100 years. A strong focus of Micah’s prophecies was towards the privileged classes and their exploitation of the poor and other forms of corruption. His prophecies focused strongly on Jerusalem and its destruction but also on its eventual restoration. Micah also predicted the

destruction of Samaria because of its worship of idols. Interestingly he predicted that when Jerusalem was restored ushering in a time of universal peace, even the Gentiles would be moved by God away from the worship of idols. An early expression of concern for Gentiles that would re-emerge with Jesus.

In Micah 5 the following appears: *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.* Christians see that as a prediction of the birth of Jesus some 700 years later.

So what do we take from the passage we heard read this evening? Well clearly Micah is deploring those who practice evil deeds particularly coveting and taking over things like fields and houses to the detriment of others. He predicts that they shall pay dearly for their wickedness and their greed. Such people are, indeed, people who welcome empty falsehoods that justify their privilege and their riches. I don't think it take a great deal of imagination to conjure up pictures of our 21st century version of those people who are amassing entirely unprecedented wealth at the expense of multitudes who have less than can support even basic lives. Think of the falsehoods they spin to justify their monopoly on resources. But then Micah brings the good news: *I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture; it will resound with people. The one who breaks out will go up before them; they will break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head.* God will bring justice for the deprived who will become a remnant of Israel.

Micah lived at a time of great threat to Judah, a period that in so many ways seemed like "end-times". Micah proclaimed that while those who *devise wickedness and evil deeds* would be subject to *evil from which you cannot remove your necks*, even as the remnant was delivered. There is a very strong sense of "end-times" today. The mega-rich, the authoritarians, the cruel, the self-obsessed are very much in control in so many places that we could not even have imagined just a very few years ago. Micah's message of deliverance is just as powerful today as it was 28 centuries ago. In Chapter 6, Micah tells us how we might be delivered as part of the remnant, *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?* If we all could follow that advice, there would be peace on earth and just maybe we would feel the second coming achieved. Amen