

Do justice, Love kindness, Walk humbly

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

I have been struck by the loud echo down through history of the words of the prophet Micah who, asking what it is that God expects from His people by way of behaviour, says we are required, all of us, "...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

In his Annual Message to Congress (State of the Union Address) on January 6, 1941, Franklin Roosevelt presented his reasons for American involvement in World War II, making the case for continued aid to Great Britain and greater production of war industries at home. In helping Britain, President Roosevelt stated, the United States was fighting for the universal freedoms that all people possessed.

As America entered the War these "four freedoms" - the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear - symbolized America's war aims and gave hope in the following years to a war-wearied people because they knew they were fighting for freedom and a better, fairer, kinder world. These ideals were also used in the Atlantic Charter declared by Churchill and Roosevelt later in 1941. They shaped the formation of both United Nations organization and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These 'four freedoms' were also the basis of the 2022 BBC Reith Lectures, which are still available on BBC Sounds and worth a listen.

"The freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear", remain at the heart of civilized and humane democracy. They should and must shape the kind of world we live in and want to live in. It is why empty talk about integrity and transparency in government, from politicians of any and every political party, and particularly from the Prime

Minister and First Minister, needs to be held to account. We are governed by those who have not won the right to tell us what to do and how to do it, but who have been entrusted by the people with the privilege of ensuring freedom, justice, compassion and tolerance are embedded in the life of our nation. They, like all of us, are also required to, "do justice, love kindness, walk humbly..." Then we are faced with current ethical and moral quagmires. A former Chancellor not paying taxes and being fined not for innocence but for guilt. A former Prime Minister entangling, intentionally or otherwise, the appointment of the BBC Chairman with the arranging of meetings to secure a loan of around £800,00. The appalling lack of response and decision from the Home Office and a local authority for the care and protection of vulnerable young asylum seekers, some 200 of whom are still missing, 13 of whom are under 16. Some of whom alleged already to be in the hands of people traffickers. A Metropolitan police officer confessing to dozens of rape and sexual offences against women, with that one force also investigating 1,000 sexual and domestic abuse claims involving about 800 of its officers. Older people in many parts of our country terrified of heating their homes because of the cost, and in some instances succumbing to hypothermia. The placement of a trans man, convicted of rape, placed in a Women's Prison, though now being removed.

"Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly..."

There are some parts of the Old Testament that appear not to have much to say to our C21st world. This does. There are some parts of the Old Testament, including this one, that keep coming up time and time again. With good reason. It speaks beyond its time and context and into our time and context.

The context is: "What does God want us to do and to be?" What does God require of us, as women and men and children? What does God require from society, Governments, charities, businesses,

educational establishments, financial institutions, legal systems, health and care services, churches and faith communities.

“Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly...”

What does that look like for you and for me? What kind of impact do those words have on our attitude, the way we treat others, and ourselves, in the world in which we live today? Are you fair in your dealings with others, filled with integrity and authenticity? Are you passionate about being kind towards others, and yourselves, ensuring that warmth and understanding, and forgiveness too, are bound up in the way you behave? Are you aware not only of the faults of others, which are many, but also aware of your own faults and failings, and seek in equal parts to address the faults of others, because you have first addressed your own failings?

What kind of world would it be if we did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly?

Might it be tied in to the equally challenging passage from Matthew’s Gospel, called the Beatitudes, the blessings? “Whenever we hear the Beatitudes, we are struck with their poetic beauty and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their perceived impracticality for the world in which we live. We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice.

We live in a time when the blessings given are to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear.”ⁱ

It is not the impossibility of Jesus’ teaching that unnerves us, it is the possibility. It is our uneasiness about the truth lying behind these words and the fact that we will only see the kind of better world we want if we choose to live the better way Jesus in the Beatitudes, and Micah in his, do justice, love kindness, walk humbly, that forms the hard-hitting truth here.

Jesus' principles in the Beatitudes boil down to three things. Simplicity, hopefulness and compassion. Complementing, I think, doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly.

Are our lives so complex and convoluted and tangled that we can't see their utter beauty and joyfulness in breathing and the good things that truly are around us. Jesus wants us to cut through the tangle. Are our lives so burdened by real worries and crushing responsibilities that we no longer have the hopefulness to lift up our heads and see that there is a horizon where the dawn will break and the night will end? Jesus wants to brighten our future sustainably. Are our lives so bleak and thankless where every little problem and worry drags us further down and down that not only do we feel others don't care for us, we barely manage to care for ourselves. Jesus wants to warm the coldness, heal the brokenness, and embrace our isolation back into community.

What a world view! But it won't happen without commitment, and hard work, and giving ourselves permission to fail at times because these are big ideals to live up to. What a world view! But it won't happen unless we marry up the big picture schemes with the little detail practicalities, giving them both their place.

What does God want? God wants us to live lives of blessing; blessing for others, blessings for ourselves, blessing for our world.

What does God want? God wants us to speak out for the oppressed, and for the unprotected, and to speak out against the people whose flagrant disregard for the rights of others, and complying with the common decencies towards humanity and responsibilities to society, need to be called out loudly.

What does God want? God wants us to love kindness and to sharing kindness in the same way God does with us.

What does God want? God wants us to realise we do not have all the answers to the problems of the world, or even the capacity to resolve them. But we have some answers, and we have some agency in the choices that we make. How do we choose and prioritise for this moment, this time? And what do we do to be the change in our world that we long to see?

Micah wrote in the C8th BC; Jesus spoke in the C1st AD. But these ancient words resonate loudly today in our world.

Simplicity, hopefulness, compassion. Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly.

Over to us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Charles James Cook, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1