

Sunday 2nd February 2020 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 a.m.		4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Epiphany 4 – Year A Education Sunday
Micah 6:1-8	Ps 15	1 Cor 1:18-31
		Matthew 5:1-12
A LIFE OF JUSTICE		

“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?” (Micah 6:8) (NRSV)

EDUCATION SUNDAY

Our town is abuzz as first year students and their parents flood in for Rhodes University Orientation Week. Claire and I have just returned from settling Rachel into UCT and Nicola into Pretoria, and so we know at first hand the excitement and the stress of these early weeks. All of us who are parents we have such high hopes and longings for our children; we want the best for them; we want them to be safe; we want to see them fly. And so our prayers are with students all over the country, at the start of the academic year.

Today is marked as Education Sunday, and our 9.30 a.m. service will have that as the focus. It has become something of a tradition and an annual event, when we invite school pupils and teachers – learners and educators, and parents - from all over our town to gather here in the Cathedral, for worship, and to commit the year that lies ahead, to God.

I look back at my school years with gratitude – thankful that I was at a good school, but also thankful that I don’t have to write matric again. My teenage years are a very distant memory. School can be fun – the place where we make our best friends. It can be terrible – we meet our worst enemies. We laugh and cry on the same day. It can be the best time of our life, and the worst. A number of our schools are scary places, with gangs, drugs, violence and sexual assault all too common. Large classes and overloaded teachers make

life incredibly stressful. So our prayers are with all our schools; teachers; university students; parents; academics; the department of education.

It has already been a rocky year. We acknowledge the tragic drowning of Enock Mpianzi, a Grade 8 boy at Parktown Boys High School in Gauteng, who was buried yesterday; there have been horrific scenes on social media of a school girl bullying and assaulting other girls – thankfully the department has intervened and the girl has been suspended; there have also been violent protests on a number of university campuses and already at least one university has sent all students home until further notice.

At the heart of so much that is happening is the cry for justice, for fair play, for what is right. Most of us have a strong sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice. We want to see justice done; we want those in authority to rule with justice, with fairness, for the good of all. We are angry when we see unfairness, or injustice, or the abuse of power.

MICAH

The prophet Micah, our first reading, gives a summary of Old Testament ethics – how we are to live.

“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?” (Micah 6:8)

The prophet Micah attacked the corruption that was destroying Israelite society – the greed of the rich and powerful, the dishonesty of the business people, the worship of pagan gods – and the way in which the powerless in society were exploited and oppressed. And yet this corrupt, greedy, dishonest society came to worship. They were religious. They offered sacrifices. They made the right noises. They looked good.

True religion, true spirituality, Micah says, “is not the offering of empty sacrifices, but rather the living of a moral life, the practice of justice in society, and a genuine reverence for God.”¹

To do justice – that refers to the structures of society, the way our politics work, the laws that govern us. Those in authority, those who have power, are tasked with ensuring that the way our society works is just, is fair, does not oppress or mistreat anyone.

To love kindness – that refers to how each of us should relate to others. We are to be kind, to love kindness. I suggest that the opposite of kindness is harshness or cruelty, or indifference. We are to love kindness. Be kind to one another, to those we work with, to those we interact with. Speak kindly, not with harshness or anger, to those who help us, to those close to us, those who work for us. Help where we can. See what we can do, to build up, rather than to break down. And we expect that those who serve the public – nurses, traffic department, home affairs, police – will speak with kindness and courtesy.

To walk humbly with your God. We are not merely secular activists. Activism without spirituality, and the humility that comes with a spiritual life, makes for arrogance and crude abuse of power. Instead, we are called to walk humbly with God. Let us find our dependence and our guidance in the Lord. Let us look to God for grace and strength. Micah reminds the people of Israel that God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and had led them to freedom: “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” (Micah 6:6).

St Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, reminds them, and us, of the cross of Christ: “we proclaim Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23). We have been saved by the cross of Christ, by his death and resurrection. That is our redemption. He has set us free from the oppression of sin. As Christians, we are an ethical people, we act and live justly and

¹ *The African Bible* 1999, 1579

kindly, because of our relationship with God, because God has saved us. We are brought back, again and again, to the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ offered for our salvation and for the healing of the world.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6)

AND SO...

To enter into the field of justice and kindness is to touch pain. We live in a profoundly damaged and distorted world, a broken world, a world in desperate need of healing and redemption and restoration. So if we long for justice, for righteousness, it means that we come in touch with pain, with suffering, with heartache, with brokenness, with human sin.

And we experience and encounter anger, rage – sometimes our own, sometimes others. We don't always get it right. We are part of the problem and we are also by God's grace part of the solution. We carry the heartache of others in our hearts. We face our own deep disappointment and pain and sorrow. We are the walking wounded, even though we have received the grace and goodness of God.

But in the words of the gospel, the beatitudes, we are blessed. In our poverty of spirit, in our grieving, in our humility and powerlessness, in our hunger and thirst for what is right, in our longing and striving for peace, for God's will to be done, we are the blessed ones.

CONCLUSION

Let us be those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, for God's will, for God's kingdom to come.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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