

O Little Town

Butting in on the story

“But you, O Bethlehem . . .” Cries the prophet Micah. This is the prophecy the Scribes would refer King Herod to when the Magi came asking , “Where is he born King of the Jews?” They would tell him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, just as the prophet had foretold, ‘But you, O Bethlehem . . .’” The Christian interest in this Old Testament text is obvious, due to the birth of Jesus in this little town just South of Jerusalem.

But I would ask you to meditate for a moment on that small word, “*but*.” For Christians, it can be a useless appendage, stuck on the front of Micah 5:2, yet it raises the question, *but what?* What comes next, after the word “but” can only be understood as a direct contrast to what Micah has already said *previous* to that little word “but. We are “butting-in” on an ongoing story that unfolded during Micah’s life, a story Micah is telling and we must seek to understand it before we try and relate it to the birth of Jesus Christ. Why did this little town 15km South of Jerusalem, out in the sheep country, come to the attention of Micah the prophet?

Micah has just given his people a very dark warning. He has spoken of their conquest and exile. Tough times are about to befall his people. The “*whole* story” the prophets tell us, reveals a pattern of how God deals with human history. These ancient prophetic oracles are not just a past record of the life of Israel before the birth of Christ. Nor are they simply convenient places to cut out lovely verses to adorn the front of Christmas cards. No. Micah is issuing a challenge. The mighty nations are in for a rude awakening. They think they can just roll over little places like Bethlehem. Nobody *important* lives there. They’ll surrender without a fight. But what the high and mighty don’t understand is God’s total plan for his people. O yes, judgments come on God’s people, and the prophets make it abundantly clear why. BUT that’s not the end of the story. The Bible reveals in God’s dealing with humankind a clear and continuing pattern. The prophets bear witness to a carefully unfolding plan of *salvation* that God is rolling out *today* just as much as in the past, and will continue to roll out into the future.

So before we “but-in” right in the middle of this prophecy of Micah this morning, we should reflect on *our* times in light of this prophet’s message. O, little town, - let us never say, we’re nobodies in a no where little town. No. We should ask ourselves where can *we* start to make a difference in our world? Micah had Good News for the little town of Bethlehem, but he also issued a challenge: What change would *we* find most difficult if we were seeking to bring our spiritual lives more in line with the thrust of Micah’s message? If we are to take the “Micah challenge”? Well, according to the prophet himself, a good starting point might be summed up in just five words:

Walk Humbly with your God

The Messiah came, to Bethlehem. To you “who are one of the *little* clans of Judah . . .” Do you think it was without reason that God choose a little, no-where place, a cave behind a stable? This is where God came into our world. Right here, in the back-country of a land down-trodden by the boots of numerous empires, Rome being only the latest. He came humbly to a little town in a backwash of a great empire, in a world whose very power structures fuel the flames of human pride and arrogance. A world where the lure of wealth and high position pose the rhetorical question, *Humility?* Ha! *That’s* only for losers! But to the prophet Micah, it was more important to be obedient than to be victorious. Or as *he* puts it, “walk humbly with your God”.

(6:8)

What does *that* mean in our success oriented, consumer society where marketers constantly set before us the latest cell phones, sleek luxury cars, high-tech home appliances? A TV world where only *attractive* prosperous people are put forth as “normal.” How can we be sure in our lives we’re truly desiring God and not just success? What does it mean to “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God?”

Our search for the answer will bring us back to this little town. The story of Bethlehem, of Mary, Joseph, of nameless shepherds, a kind innkeeper, mystified magi, *everyone* we meet in this *little* town seems to remind us that the greatest response God desires from us is one made not out of duty but out of *love*. He wants us to love him above all else.

Being part of the story of Bethlehem requires a rejection of the external trappings of power and wealth to pursue a deep inner walk with God. It requires a moment by moment obedience to the Spirit of God. It requires that our lives be regulated by a system of values seldom seen operative in this *world*. To walk humbly with our God is seek to balance the moral absolutes God has built into the creation itself with the common human frailty we all have. We all need to forgive and be forgiven. In the story of Bethlehem we find at play values that are not self-centred, but totally focused on the needs of others. And if we can find this *little* place in our own lives, this *humble* walk with our God, it is there that we will . . .

Receive our King

So Micah says of Bethlehem, “from you shall come forth for me one who is to *rule* in Israel . . .”

So let us consider briefly, *not* the baby of Bethlehem but the adult Christ – the one in whom we have faith, the one who is to *rule*. In what sense might we say he *rules* in our lives? We today are besieged in our world by a spirit of apathy, secularity, dysfunction and greed. And when such things have free reign all around us, it’s hard not to be *ruled* by them. This world can bring the best of us to the brink of utter despair. But despair gives birth to hope if we can re-centre ourselves in Christ – let earth receive her *king*. He *is* Lord of the natural environment and over the affairs of the human economy. What brings us sense of security is knowing that we can trust Jesus Christ to launch the counter-attack against those soul-sucking and planet-destroying forces that we all fear:

To the *apathetic* . . .

who say, ah there’s nothing *we* can do! Jesus says, “O, yeah! well you just follow me!” In following Christ, we have something truly worth fighting for, even worth *dying* for. The task of building his kingdom in this world is never without excitement. Gospel ministry will test the limits of even the most ardent rope-hanging, banner unfurling Greenpeacer. There’s work to do.

To the *secular minded* . . .

for whom the human self is sovereign, he says “render unto *God* the things that belong to *God*.” The other night on TV there was a piece on a certain village in Israel that has become 100% energy- self-sufficient. With 360 days of sunshine per year the entire village is powered by solar energy. The Israeli man being interviewed said, “*The sunshine is a gift from God! So we should use it.*” It struck me how natural it was for this man in his Eastern culture to invoke God and how rare in the Western mainstream where the world around us is understood as an *IT* which we can simply analyze and use for our benefit. But what a *difference* it makes when we understand ourselves as beings in a personal relationship with *God* and each other.

To the *dysfunctional* . . .

he says, “arise, your faith has made you well. “ I don’t want to minimize the complexity of human conflicts. But there is no problem within any family or any community, any school or place of work, that the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus can’t *save*, through prayer, obedience, or simple acts of compassion and love.

To the *greedy* . . .

he says, “ sell all you possess and give to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven.” Through the prophet Micah, the Lord asks, “ Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?” (6:11) Perhaps *our* “Micah challenge” must be faced up to in the “big box” store. How fair are the “weights and measures” when the “lowest price guarantee” puts tremendous pressure on manufactures to produce more and more goods more and more cheaply? How does this driving force towards the cheapest possible price effect factory workers in the developing world? Farmers in our own country? Small family businesses in our own community?

Here’s the Micah challenge: “Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?”

Considering God’s discipline of biblical Israel, how should it effect the choices we make in what we buy? How our marketplace is regulated? How the environment is protected?

Even today, if we are to *receive our king* we must go back to this little town of Bethlehem, this humble . . .

Place of Birth

“. . . whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

I’ve just had a birthday, and the other day I was renewing my passport in Cranbrook. The young woman who was processing the form looked at my passport and noticed that my place of birth is listed as East York Township. This young woman was from Ontario and was familiar with the Greater Toronto Region, so she says, “ Wow! Back when you were born they still called it East York Township!?”

I tell you, that’ll make you feel like your “origin is from of old, from ancient days.” But it was a good feeling. A lot of things can change. New buildings can go up, old ones be torn down. Parents and loved ones can pass away, but your place of birth remains the same.

It was important to Jesus that he was born in Bethlehem. He happened to be born there, you’ll remember, because he was descended from the house and family of King David. Bethlehem was the birthplace of the little shepherd boy who would one day face off with a giant named Goliath. This same David would come forth as the ruler of Israel. But this birthplace also put Jesus in mind of even older roots that would shape the way he understood himself, roots that went back to God’s covenant with Abraham. God would bless all nations of the world through the seed of Abraham. And Jesus Christ was that seed, planted and rooted in Jewish soil.

Bethlehem takes us back to the birthplace of *our faith*. In the Apostle’s Creed we confess, “I believe in God the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, *who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary . . .*” We put this forth as *truth*.

Reigning in the society around us, of course, is the broadly accepted idea that no one should be allowed to claim to know the truth. Ah, but we Christians can turn around and ask on what basis *their* claim should be accepted as true! The great missionary and theologian Leslie Newbign

makes the point well” [They are making the] claim to know something about reality – namely that reality is unknowable.” They can’t have it both ways: to claim that no one can know the truth, but in the same breathe make that claim – what kind of society allows this kind of thinking? Newbiggin suggests “a cosmopolitan world, in which individuals lead a rootless existence and are without a firm and stable social tradition.”

Can I suggest to you that Bethlehem gives us just that. It brings us back to our spiritual birthplace. Our faith is rooted in *historic realities* surrounding the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have every reason to believe that in Jesus God moved in and lived among us and in doing so became our Saviour. This we believe, even though in this contemporary society, Christian faith may leave us with . . .

A temporary sense of abandonment

So Micah continues in verse 3" Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth . . .

If we can set aside for a moment the church’s later reading of this, that Jesus born in Bethlehem was the long-anticipated ruler, we realize that for the prophet “ Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1), this prophetic word had to do with *his world*. Moresheth was where he was born was just a small village not too far from Bethlehem. Micah hopes for a “rural king” – a shepherd – who will not be beholden to the urban establishment in Jerusalem. One who can rescue Judah and confound the great powers in distant capital cities. But he knows that until that promised one comes, his people will languish “ until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth . . .”

Today you and I as people of Christian faith may feel “frozen-out”, from the mainstream, from the ruling academia, snubbed by the politically correct, never the less, you and I as people of faith will always find a

A warm welcome in Bethlehem

Of the ruler to come from Bethlehem, Micah writes, “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.

The little town of Bethlehem is not a ghetto where we flee to hide away in the Christian church culture. There something naturally attractive in the Gospel. Once all the cultural “wrappings” are taken away, people *will* return to it. Bethlehem is a place where the pilgrims wearily wandering in the wasteland of consumer culture can come home and find their spiritual roots. It’s a place to recharge the inner person.

But Bethlehem is a place “out there,” where Mary, Joseph, Jesus put themselves on the line, shared their deepest spiritual revelations with those who lived within the Roman world. And those who met God that day in the baby of Bethlehem, shepherds, and magi alike, found the strength to carry God’s kingdom forward into that dark pagan Roman world. In Bethlehem, they took up Micah’s challenge.

So must we. Daunting? O Yes. We’re up against centuries of hatred between religious traditions, gross injustices in the world economy, wars and global terrorism, environmental catastrophe that threatens our planet – any one of them a classic David versus Goliath struggle. But remember, people who can pull stuff like this off: that’s what they are famous for in this little town of Bethlehem.