

NOT THE USUAL WAY

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Micah 6:1-8 - What does the Lord require of us?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - God's foolishness and human wisdom

Matthew 5:1-12 - The beatitudes on the mountain

Long ago and far away, some 700-odd years before the birth of Christ, at a time when Yahweh's chosen people were divided into a northern kingdom they called Israel with its capital at Samaria, and a southern kingdom called Judah with its capital at Jerusalem, when the threat of invasion by Assyria struck terror into the hearts of those kingdoms' rulers who, forgetting their heritage of salvation and giving into their fear, had led their nations astray, there arose a prophet, a rustic country fellow from Moresheth, named Micah who was led by the spirit to expose the truth, to expose the truth about what had become of his people.

Micah spoke to the rulers, the ones who were in government both in Samaria and Jerusalem, and said: "You've taken the values and the traditions that have made us strong as a people through all these centuries, and you have dragged them through the mud. You've turned them into trading pieces for your political gain and your power games, and for the corporate interests and business leaders and the barons of commerce." He said: "You've used people for your own gain--you have exploited them, you've even taken away their land, you've even taken away their homes. You've shamed your own people, destroyed the soul of your own society, and defeated yourself as a nation. You've torn the skin from the backs of your own people, you've ripped the flesh from their bones, you've chopped them up like meat in a kettle, plunged them into darkness for days without light. And you've left our children and our grandchildren a legacy only of shame and disgrace."

When the fear-driven rulers, the greed-driven barons of commerce, the false prophets and all whom they had misled, heard Micah's words they went to the priests and asked: "How do we pay for these errors we've made? How can we buy back the favour of Yahweh our God?" And the priests told them: "You just have to make bigger sacrifices--more oil, more rams, maybe even a servant or two." And the rulers and the barons of commerce said: "Hey, no problem, our expenses are good. We can bring you thousands of rams, we can bring you 10,000 rivers of oil. We might even throw in a few first-born children. That ought to take care of it. Who do we make the cheque out to? Oh, Micah, thanks for bringing this little problem to our attention. It's all handled." And then Micah said: "Yahweh, our God, is not interested in any of that. You know what the Holy One requires of you--justice, kindness, walking humbly in the holy way. As long as your wealthy and comfortable lifestyle is maintained at the cost of the suffering of the poor, all your sacrifices ring hollow in Yahweh's ears."

When the people heard Micah's words they were really afraid because they didn't know how to tell if the words were true or not. And yet, those words seemed to shed a new light on their lives. This way that Micah was preaching was definitely not the usual way, and yet there was a strange warming in their hearts. It seemed like a wimpy, gutless, powerless way, and yet

in an odd way they felt a kind of empowerment grow deep within them as they listened to his words.

Well, Assyria had their way, and they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel which was never to be again. And eventually the southern kingdom of Judah became a vassal of foreign states. And the centuries passed. Judah regained its power momentarily and then lost it to the Romans. By that time the people had forgotten what it was to be truly blessed by their God, and so they looked for artificial signs of God's blessing. They thought: "Well, if we're wealthy, that must be a sign of God's blessing." They thought: "If we get ahead, if we make it to the top of the ladder, if we win, then we can look down on the losers and laugh. That must be a sign of God's blessing." And they thought: "If we get enough to eat, if we get to consume much and to be really opulent, that must be a sign of God's blessing." They thought: "Well, if we're popular, if we win all the votes, if we're on the latest bandwagon, that must be a sign of God's blessing."

But in those days there arose another prophet, Jesus of Nazareth--a prophet among so many other things--who was a surprise to the people because there had been no words of prophecy for so long. This prophet said to the rich and the wealthy: "You are missing the point. There is a kind of poverty that draws us closer to the sacred." He said to those who were full, and a long way from hunger: "It is the ones who live not in their self-righteousness, but who are hungry for God's righteousness. They are the ones who are truly blessed." And he said to those who were the winners, who laughed at all the losers: "It is the ones who are crying, the ones who know how to cry. They are the ones who are closer to the heart of the holy, and the ones who will laugh with true joy." And to those who thought their popularity was their blessing, winning all the votes, being on the bandwagon, he said: "All the prophets throughout the centuries, whom history proved to be true prophets, were disbelieved, disregarded, and scorned, in their own times."

The people listened to Jesus' words, and they thought: "How can we know whether this is true or not?" And yet his words shed a whole new light on their lives. They thought: "This isn't the usual way. This is a very strange way that he preaches." And yet there was a wonderful warming in their hearts. They thought: "This sounds weak and wimpy and gutless." And yet they felt a deeper empowerment within, one they had never felt before.

The rulers of Jesus' time turned against him, and they killed him in the most tortuous and humiliating and painful way they could devise. And yet when Paul was teaching after having felt the presence of Christ living on in his own heart, he said to the people: "For some people, their whole lives are about power. And yet God's way is a way of weakness, a weakness that far overpowers the most powerful of the world." And he said: "Some people look for wisdom, and yet God's way is a way of foolishness, of foolishness that is far wiser than any worldly wisdom."

As the people listened, those words brought back the words of all the prophets--Jesus, Micah, and so many others--the words that had left them wondering "Is this true or not?" And yet a strange light was shed on their lives, a light that enabled them to see life in a profoundly new way. All those words throughout the centuries had made them wonder: "This way isn't the usual way, and yet we feel a strange warming in our hearts." All those words that felt so wimpy and powerless had left them feeling a deeper sense of empowerment than they had ever felt before.

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