

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

ANZAC Commemoration

22 April 2007

Preacher
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Rector

Readings: Micah 4.1-4; Matthew 5.1-12

Like me you probably were horrified by the shootings carried out by Cho Seung Hui at Virginia Tech this week – I found myself reflecting on what if that had been my son – feeling for his parents. Their shock and horror and anguish. Imagine them saying, “What did we do wrong? How might we have prevented this?”

I must confess to not knowing a lot about the personal details of the prophet Micah who gave us that wonderful passage Bob read as our first reading today. Full of such a promise that conflict amongst tribes and nations might cease and swords be beaten into plough shares and spears into pruning hooks and of prosperity for all. Reflect of the deep yearning of people down through the ages that we might learn to live peaceably, with justice and equity as a human family. I am not sure that a lot is to be known about whether he had a wife and children etc. However a passage from Micah chapter 6 makes me feel that he almost certainly was a parent. For it seems to me that only a parent would have the insight and understanding to be able to so evocatively put into words the message that God has for God's people. Any of us who are parents will identify with God's cry in the mouth of Micah, “oh my people what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! Why are you so indifferent to me?” The cry of a parent who yearns that his/her children know and receive and respond to the parents love and care and protection, which has been displayed continually since the birth of the new Israel rescued out of slavery in Egypt. Most if not all parents have the same experience, at least some of the time (for some sadly it is most if not all of the time) of feeling that their child(ren) do not fully appreciate all they have done and continue to do to care, protect and provide for them. And when they muck up, as invariably they do, though thankfully not to the awful extent of Cho Seung Hui do we not echo God's words expressed through his prophet Micah, “What have we done, or failed to do to merit this kind of behaviour? How have we failed you?”

Micah suggests that the Israelites response to God's calling them to account is to offer to make an escalating number of sacrifices, even going to the extent of suggesting that they sacrifice their firstborn. No says Micah what is required (and then he uses what are perhaps the most quoted words of the Old Testament) “He (i.e. God) 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.”

Sounds a simple doesn't it? We have heard that challenge so often: do justice-not talk about it, and not theorise, not aspire to it, but do justice. I have something more to say about that in a minute. Love kindness: a call to compassion, to gentleness, to treating others with respect. Love kindness, if you love kindness then you will foster it, cherish it and do all you can to make it increase. Walk humbly with your God: there's a sense of intimacy and closeness about that. Micah doesn't say go for a chariot ride but rather walk humbly. To go walking with someone is an act of friendship, of intimacy. It provides time and space to talk, to listen, to share. Walking is such a significant thing to do with another, not jogging or running but walking. As I have reflected about this I have a much greater appreciation and understanding of why it is that one of our friends goes walking on three mornings of the week with two different people. Walking with what Kosoke Koyama the Japanese theologian calls the three miles an hour God, the God who walks with his people. Not run, or rush but walk giving time for intimate connection and interaction.

That brings me to the Beatitudes, as today's gospel passage from Matthew chapter 5 has become known, with its interesting/challenging collection of reasons for counting oneself blessed. I want to focus on just one of these and link it with the Micah passage about doing justice, loving mercy and walking with God and that wonderful passage about learning war no more. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Doing justice and loving kindness/mercy has a lot to do with being a peacemaker, and maybe, just maybe if we can be called God's children then we will find we are walking humbly with our God; our experience of God will be one of closeness and intimacy.

In this world of ours it's hard to be a peacemaker, whether it is at the personal level, of seeking to make peace with someone from whom we have become estranged (whatever the original fault may have been), or at the group or work level, or on the national - international stage. Part of the problem is that we fall into the trap of seeing the world in terms of good guys and bad guys. In terms of right and wrong, of victim and victimiser, of guilty and innocent. This sets up a them and us mentality. This is very evident if you have ever been to a protest rally or march. I vividly recall some a few years ago to protest about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. For most if not all there and certainly the speakers the "good guys" were the refugees and the "bad guys" the Australian government and John Howard and Philip Ruddock in particular. So they and the government and the Department of immigration and the people running the detention centres became the object of many barbs and insults. Now I found myself increasingly troubled by such an experience. Not because I agree with what the government was doing, far from it, as I'm sure you've all become well aware I think the policies of successive governments, Labour and Liberal alike, on the issue of asylum seekers and mandatory detention in particular have been and continue to be shameful. They need to be and must be opposed and repudiated. But one needs to do so in a way that does not just perpetuate the violence of the duality of "we the enlightened" righteous people and "they" the bad government.

My reading and reflecting has helped me to increasingly see the way Jesus sought to overcome the good guy/bad guy, victim/victimiser mentality. So that rather than them and us we might begin to think of finding a way of talking and experiencing "we". How might we do that? - I'm not sure I fully know, but I think the beginning of an answer lies in admitting our own complicity, whatever the situation we are trying to bring reconciliation to. To recognise that good and bad, fault and being wronged lie on both sides, in each one of us.

Perhaps we have something to learn from the story told by Rowan Williams at the John Main seminar here in Sydney few years ago about Abba Moses, one of the desert monks of the third and fourth century. Abba Moses was called by the other brothers of the community to a meeting to judge one of the brothers accused of some wrong. He at first refused to come, so they sent a brother to fetch him. Eventually Abba Moses left his cell and came across the desert carrying a pot filled with water. The pot had holes in the bottom so the water trailed out behind him as he came. The brothers saw him coming and said "Abba Moses what are you doing?" Abba Moses replied, "I am coming to judge one of my brothers and my sins run out behind me." At that they cancelled the meeting and all went back to their cells.

Now that there is not to be taken as permission to be passive and do nothing. Remember all that is required for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. But perhaps it has something to say about the way we approach doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God, that we might be peacemakers and truly earn the right to be called children of God.