

Homily – 02.02.20 – The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

This is the first of four Sundays before the beginning of Lent. In the readings each week we can identify the common theme that Christian faith offers a life-giving way of being in the world. More than Creeds and Doctrines; more than a community of shared belief; Christian faith offers distinct ways of understanding who we are, where we come from, and what our purpose is.

In two of the readings this week there is a strong emphasis on attitude. What attitudes can Christian faith grow in our character, and in our relationships with God, self, and others? Next week there is the Gospel challenge to be 'salt' and 'light', and this will give us the opportunity to reflect deeply on what these metaphors mean in our time. And then the third and fourth weeks talk about the central importance of reconciliation and love, and the ongoing challenge of these in our daily living.

This week's focus on attitude really sets the scene for us as we think about Christian faith as a way of being in the world. Somehow Christian faith is not just about gathering on a Sunday with others to sing and pray and meet with friends, it is a way of being. Through the ages people have wondered what it is that God would want from them hoping that if they did what God wanted their lives would be better. Their crops would grow, their sheep and cattle would produce young, their olive trees and grapevines would produce fruit, and their neighbours would not invade their territory!

Through the ages people have been creative in the ways they have sought to make God happy - and in many cultures some form of sacrifice has been part of this. Giving to God offerings of grain, wine and oil; silver and gold; as well as the blood sacrifice of birds, animals... and even people. One of the ways that the ancient Jewish people differentiated themselves from some Canaanite religions was that they did not have human sacrifice. They killed and burnt animals in the Jerusalem Temple, but they did not kill and burn children or adults.

Many things can go wrong when a group of people claim to be the only ones who mediate between God and the rest of humanity. The opportunity to make money from animal sacrifice - or to make profit from the yearning people have to be in good relationship with God - seems to be too hard to resist for some religious leaders through the ages. Different religions have been plagued by this... including our own.

To counter this the prophets are people through history who a community perceive God to be speaking through. Uncomfortably, the message of a prophet is usually for an individual, or even a whole a society, to change what they're doing. We hear from the prophet Micah in the first reading today, and though regarded as a minor prophet many of the words he spoke to his community, continue to speak powerfully in our time. He rhetorically asked what it was that God wanted from people. He alluded to the popular understanding taught by the Temple authorities that God wanted young cattle, rams, and rivers of olive oil, before enigmatically concluding: "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."

It would have made the community that Micah was part of pretty uncomfortable, because it challenged them to move from a transactional relationship with God to a way of being with God in the world. Instead of a, 'I'll do this sacrifice so can bless me!' transaction, there was expressed by Micah the understanding that what God really wants is for us to be compassionate, kind, and humble each day.

To share in the original discomfort of those first listeners we might have to substitute a few things because none of us are killing cattle and rams to keep God happy these days! How would it sound if we reimagined Micah asking what God wants from us in the 21st Century? Is it to come to church on a Sunday, break bread together, sing hymns, and contribute financially to the life of the church? Or, is it to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?

I sense Parish treasurers getting nervous all over the Western Region, and Wardens wanting to debate with me whether it is an either/or choice. Surely our Sunday gatherings, worship, and financial offerings help us to grow in our relationship with Christ and in God's grace we are becoming more compassionate, kind, and humble in our daily living? I hope this is true - but I for one have a long way to go and to grow in each of these areas.

About seven hundred years after Micah challenged his community to be more compassionate, kind and humble, Jesus is remembered by the Gospel writer Matthew teaching a crowd of people who had gathered with him on a mountain. It's often remembered as the Sermon on the Mount and in this Jesus articulated attitudes that would be present in those who are part of the Kingdom of God. His repeated affirmation was that those who have these attitudes, these ways of being in the world, will be 'bless-ed'. And the word 'bless-ed' here should not be understood as wealthy, healthy, or free... but, rather content and at peace.

In the nine affirmations found in this Sermon on the Mount there are some echoes from Micah about the importance of humility as Jesus affirmed: "Bless-ed are the poor in Spirit...; Bless-ed are the meek...; Bless-ed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...; and bless-ed are people when they are reviled falsely about their faith...."

There also echoes from Micah about the importance of compassion and justice:
"Bless-ed are those who mourn...; Bless-ed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...;
Bless-ed are the merciful...; and Bless-ed are the peacemakers..."

The echo from Micah about the importance to God of kindness in the behaviour and attitude of people is probably best found in the affirmation: "Bless-ed are the pure in heart..."

You may not recognise it immediately, but this is counter-cultural thinking if we accept that 'blessed' means to be content, and at peace, with God, self, and others. For Jesus did not say, 'Bless-ed are the rich and powerful?' Or, 'Bless-ed are those who have the latest technology!?' He did not say, 'Bless-ed are those who are good looking, athletic, and young!' He said bless-ed are those who, moved by compassion, make justice possible; who are kind in their relationships with others; and who walk humbly each day... in love with God.

Let's pray now that God continues to grow these attitudes in us... Holy God, we give thanks for life and love, and for the call of Christ to follow each day. Through your Spirit may our lives find meaning and purpose in responding to that call, and in your grace help us to be compassionate, kind, and humble in our living this week... Amen.