

1st February 2026

Micah 6:1-8

One of the most popular and well-loved verses in scripture is our lectionary reading today Micah 6.8

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly^[a] with your God.

What does being just, being merciful or kind and being humble look like?

Imagine two siblings and a difficult old mother who is now in a care home. One sibling is living just around the corner from her; the other is some distance away. The nearby sibling is visiting almost every day, doing bits of shopping, and listening to their mother's worries and grumbles. The distant sibling announces a visit next week. Then, the day before they are due to arrive they suddenly announce they are not coming as they have to go abroad for work. As an attempt to try and make up for this, the distant sibling sends huge bunches of flowers and boxes of chocolates for both their mum and their sibling. How will the exasperated caring sibling and the disappointed mother react when these arrive? Will the gifts do any good, make amends?

The sibling who is nearby and caring for their mother possibly feels the keenness of injustice. It feels unfair that they are burdened by such a weight of responsibility and the distant sibling doesn't take their fair share. The mother doesn't like being a burden on the nearer sibling.

In addition to this, both mother and the nearby sibling want to be shown some kindness, upfront and personal, by a visit. The token of sending flowers and chocolates seems superficial and not a truthful loving kindness. The reality is that both mother and the other sibling need a visit and an acknowledgement of their struggle.

Finally, both would like to feel that failings have been acknowledged by the absent sibling, that they now have a deepening awareness of the situation and agree that they have fallen short of what was needed. If the distant sibling could show a bit of humility rather than an over-the-top gesture, what a difference that might make.

These days we don't offer placatory gifts of fruit and flowers and livestock to our God as the people of the ancient world did. But how often are we guilty, like the sibling living at a distance, of using customary gestures, the flowers adorning the front of the church, the well-chosen hymns, the good quality coffee afterwards, to hide from our lack of attention to the things God really wants – a determined quest for justice in society, real kindness to our fellow worshippers and the wider community and a recognition – through humility – that we can never do enough. In our relationship with God, can we

avoid the mistake of the distant sibling who gave a grand gesture but not the justice, kindness and humility that was required? God calls us to walk alongside and, like the mother, wants presence, not presents!

Micah was Isaiah's contemporary, active in Judah up to and through the time that Israel fell to the Assyrians (about 740 BC to 698 BC).

Their messages were similar but Micah's was even more focused on economic injustice and God's call on his people to live ethically in the world.

In this section, the prophet envisions God taking legal action against Judah. He enlists creation as jury in the case, which is a simple one, namely that God's people are not grateful for all that he has done for them through their history and, as a result, they are not living as God requires in the Law given to Moses. So, God retells Israel's history from the Exodus onwards, a history of failing to live up to their calling as a nation. But it is also a history marked by God's gracious acts of salvation for his people.

They have tried to placate God through acts of 'worship', e.g. burnt offerings, as if that is what God wants. They have even gone to the extreme of child sacrifice despite the Torah making it abundantly clear that this is an abomination to Yahweh (Leviticus 18:21, 20:1-5 and Deuteronomy 12:30-31, 18:10).

The oracle ends with one of the most well-known utterances from the prophets in verse 8. It has nothing to do with external shows of piety and everything to do with how we live. Doing justice and loving kindness is only fully possible if we walk humbly with our God. It is simple and yet difficult and demanding.

Micah has already spelled out, in 4:1-5, that justice has to do with: economic equality, where everyone has enough to live on; peace between neighbours, where nations do nothing to make their citizens afraid; and a relationship with God marked by humble trust.

As the rest of the chapter shows us, Israel has failed at every turn. Dishonest business dealings have enriched a few at the expense of the majority. Such economic inequality is an abomination to God.

A classic and important study was done and published in 2009 by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett called *The Spirit Level*. It showed how in 1976 the wealthiest 1 percent in the United States received 7 percent of annual national income. In 2007 24 percent. In 2010 93 percent. It hasn't gone down its getting worse. Likewise here.

The countries with greater income equality do better in all categories was one of the central claims of the *Spirit Level*. They provide massive supporting data. Why isn't this the top agenda item of the main political parties you may ask?

It is the first primal cry by children up and down the land. 'It isn't fair'. As we move away from a rules based society, with rights enshrined in law and international law, to a might is right, the powerful and rich will get their own way, whether its grabbing land or grabbing money or doing whatever they like – the imperative to act justly has arguably never been so important – from Minneapolis to Greenland, from Ukraine to a workplace near you.

Bonhoeffer said we are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims under the wheel of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.

What about loving mercy?

The common meaning of mercy and merciful today suppose a power differential between two parties. Somebody with power stands in relation to an offender or victim. The former can decide to punish the latter or to reduce or forgo punishment. A judge shows mercy by commuting a death sentence to life in prison. A parent shows mercy by deciding not to punish a disobedient child. A soldier decides not to harm a captive.

The boy was begging for mercy...

Sometimes mercy and merciful do appear in the scriptures. But the actual Hebrew word used in Micah is 'hesed' which more literally is translated as compassion or kindness and has to do with love, loyalty, faithfulness. It can be used to describe the key element in relationship, whether in marriage or between friends, which is about a covenant – an unbreakable bond, a promise to stick by the other. So, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (arguably the most technically accurate version of the Bible) translates this verse as

*do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God*

The etymology (the study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history) of the word kindness or compassion is based on Latin roots to mean 'to feel with', to feel the feelings of another. It is more than a feeling though. It includes acting in accord with that feeling. Somebody who feels sorry for someone but does nothing about it would not be thought of as compassionate.

Compassion is a particularly important word in the gospels. The stories told about Jesus speak of him as having compassion and of his being moved with compassion. The word also represents the summation of his teaching about both God and ethics. For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centred in God. ...

In the Hebrew Bible the word *compassion* has rich semantic associations. In Hebrew (as well as in Aramaic), the word usually translated as "compassion" is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means "womb." In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a

feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. Sometimes it is very specifically linked to its association with womb: a woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb; she loves them, wills their well-being; and sometimes becomes fierce when their well-being is threatened. To say God is compassionate, as the Bible often does, especially when it uses the word *Hesed*, is to say that God is like this.

Unlike the common meaning of mercy today, compassion does not imply a situation of wrongdoing.

Should we show mercy or compassion towards the Palestinians in Gaza? Which is more accurate? Had they done something wrong and thus needed our mercy, our forgiveness? Or were they suffering and thus in need of compassionate care and compassionate acts?

Our understanding of mercy and compassion matters greatly. What is at stake is how we see the character of God and how we are to live. One view of the Christian faith puts the emphasis on sin as the central issue in our relationship with God and says we have offended God through our disobedience and deserve to be punished, so we appeal to God for mercy. This meaning goes with the punitive image of God's character; God is like a disappointed parent, a stern and wrathful judge, and we deserve to be punished. Mercy is connected to forgiveness. God's mercy and wrath are opposites. Within this framework mercy is good news. Who wouldn't prefer God's mercy to God's wrath?

If God did not act to punish the guilty and vindicate the oppressed it would be a denial of justice. As soon as you seek justice you imply judgement. But understanding mercy as the opposite of punishment is a severe narrowing and reduction of the meaning of the biblical and ancient Christian word. It also means the dominant mental image of God is one who is at best disapproving, judgemental and angry.

Do we see God as angry and out to punish us? But instead, God punishes Jesus so that we get mercy as Jesus takes the hit? That is one view of the atonement – how we understand what happens on the cross. Are we to be merciful (forgiving) as God is merciful.

Or are we to be compassionate as God is compassionate? God loves us and always loves us. Anger, wrath may be an expression of love just as loving parents show they care by getting angry when the children do something harmful or destructive – but they will always love their children and feel for them.

Yes Jesus dying on the cross shows God's love for us, even whilst we are sinners. But the cross was the symbol of the kingdom of this world and how the imperial elite kept control and dealt with anyone who dared challenge their power and way of life. Jesus died at the hands of the rulers of this world but God raised him from the dead in victory. God says yes to the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of

kindness, not the way to the kingdom of this world. The cross is a sign of anti-imperialism, anti-dominance. A sign of love and humility and sacrifice for others. The heart of a compassionate God.

Compassion suggests something else. To paraphrase William Blake, mercy wears a human face and compassion a human heart. ...

For many of us, how often does the issue of forgiving other people come up? To speak for myself, it's been a long time since someone sinned against me, so that I felt called to forgive that person. I am aware that forgiveness is an issue in the lives of people who have been sinned against, often in terrible and horrific ways -and I don't want to make light of that. But in my experience, the need to forgive others because they have wronged me has been rare. How often have you felt the need to be merciful?

The point is that the use of the words mercy and merciful narrows the meaning of this saying significantly – they apply only occasionally.

Think how the meaning of this saying changes if we substitute, as I believe we should, the words compassion or kindness for mercy and merciful.

do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God

Its meaning is far more comprehensive. Mercy is a reactive virtue; we are called to be merciful on those occasions when we have been wronged. Compassion, kindness covers a much larger area of life, indeed all of life; we are to be compassionate, kind.

The importance of that is that it crystallizes theology (what God is like) and ethics (how are we to live) into a few words. God's character is compassion, and we are to be compassionate. We are to show kindness as God shows kindness. Compassion and kindness are much more than mercy.

Beliefs matter very much. There are 'bad' beliefs that can get in the way of faith and lead to fear and worse. Bad beliefs have too often been the source of intolerance, cruelty, injustice, persecution, barbarism. So also 'good' beliefs matter – they can help us get rid of unnecessary stumbling blocks to being a Christian, and, even most importantly they can shape us into becoming more compassionate, just, and peaceful beings.

Believing the right things is not all that matters. Faith is a much deeper movement of the heart, of the self at its deepest level. Christian faith is allegiance to and trust in God as known in Jesus. If we believe Jesus is the supreme revelation of God – what God is like - then we know God is above all compassionate.

Mercy has to do with legalism – you get what you deserve – you may waive the punishment as an act of mercy. Kindness is life giving nourishing quality, reminding

ourselves that this is the quality of God's character. God is not primarily a threatening judge to whom we appeal for mercy, but a life giving and nourishing reality who wills our well-being and the well-being of creation, just as a mother wills the well-being of the children of her womb. And we are reminding ourselves that this is how we should be.

Finally walk humbly with your God.

Some scholars have pointed out that the word for humbly might better be understood as carefully or circumspectly. The key word is 'walk'. We are to walk with God, careful to put God first and to live in conformity with God's will. Our life pilgrimage is likened to a walk with God as our constant companion.

They key verses from Micah are about lifestyle, one's total outlook on life, and one's ethical values. They reject the simplistic notion that there is one thing you can do (ritually or otherwise) to make things right between you and God. Like making a sacrifice or showing up at church -good those things may be. But it is a walk, a journey through life, being present and being open to God, the God we see in Jesus, which is why scripture talks about how we have peace, we are made right with God through Jesus because we see through Jesus the God who is kind and compassionate and just and calls us to be the same. Walk on. With justice and kindness in your heart. For you will never walk alone! Walk on!