

## FALSE COMFORT AND TRUE PEACE

### Micah 2:1-13

In chapter 2 of the book of Micah, which was our reading today, the Prophet Micah tells us how God hates evil and injustice and will in due time punish those who not only commit evil but lie awake in their beds at night plotting evil. Of course, those who are true Christians are saved from their sins by the blood of Christ who died for our sins if we turn to Christ and acknowledge his saving death and accept him as our Lord and master. But, can we really claim to have accepted Christ as our Lord and master, if we not only continue to sin, but deliberately plot and plan further and greater sins.

Let's look at what the prophet Micah says in more detail. We'll begin with verses 1 to 5 of our reading:

“Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellow-man of his inheritance. Therefore, the LORD says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day men will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: 'We are utterly ruined; my people's possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.'" Therefore you will have no-one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by lot.” (Micah 2:1-5 NIV)

This is what is technically known as a woe oracle, a prophecy of judgement. Micah describes the sins which are being committed, unjustly depriving ordinary people of their possessions and summarizes God's punishment for those who commit these sins. The punishment will be the utter ruin of the sinners. They are not victims of sudden temptation, but deliberate wrongdoers of longstanding guilt. They spend countless hours lying sleepless in bed devising the crafty schemes they will pursue in the daytime. Their diligence would be commendable if it were directed towards good and useful acts rather

than venal sins. Micah's attack on these villains sounds rather like Isaiah at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 5:

“Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: “Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants.” (Isaiah 5:8-9 NIV)

Micah was a ‘country cousin’ to Isaiah and was writing in the eighth century B.C. which was a period that saw great change. There had been an influx of new wealth into the country under King Uzziah, which had evidently benefited some more than others. The exploitation of new capital and economic opportunities was resulting in the squeezing out of the small man from the agricultural scene, just as today there is pressure in many Western countries upon the small shopkeeper and small businessman.

Micah protests even more ardently than Isaiah at the greed and selfishness of the ‘landgrabbers’. He deplores the unscrupulous way in which they acquire new property. They are heedless of the suffering they cause, unbothered by scruples about the shady tricks they play to get more and more land. I think it's very significant that Micah uses the word ‘covet’. Remember the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

So Micah is saying that these landgrabbers are breaking the fundamental law of God. Paul said that covetousness was equivalent to idolatry:

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” (Colossians 3:5-6 NIV)

The landgrabbers are setting up the golden calf which Aaron made all over again and worshipping this calf. That's absolutely forbidden and hated by YAHWEH the God of Paul and Micah. Also, as I said a

moment ago, covetousness itself is forbidden as a breach of the tenth commandment. Further, we need to remember that the use and ownership of land was of particular importance and significance in ancient Israel. From their perspective, land was received in a sacred trust from Yahweh and handed down the family from generation to generation. It is this point of view which is at work in King Ahab's takeover of Naboth's vineyard – even though that took place a century or so before Micah is writing. Look at what Naboth said::

“But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”” (1 Kings 21:3 NIV)

So Micah is acting explicitly as Yahweh's spokesman. His words are not his own. Yahweh says that the landgrabbers will be dealt with as they have treated others. Micah has a keen sense of fair play and a passion for 'poetic justice'. This has in a sense continued into the NT as 'reaping what one sows'. Calvin said:

“It is the peculiar office of God ... to render to each the measure of evil they have brought on others”.

So it will be for the landgrabbers. Here, Micah may well have been prophetically looking forward to the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom.

In verse 4 Micah says that the landgrabbers downfall will be an object lesson to others not to follow in their path. There will be no rehabilitation or restoration for them.

Micah then turns his attention to true and false prophecy in verses 6-11:

“"Do not prophesy," their prophets say. "Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us." Should it be said, O house of Jacob: "Is the Spirit of the LORD angry? Does he do such things?"

"Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright? Lately my people have risen up like an enemy. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. You drive the women of my people from their pleasant homes. You take away my blessing from their children for ever. Get up, go away! For this is not your resting place, because it is defiled, it is ruined, beyond

all remedy. If a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ he would be just the prophet for this people!’” (Micah 2:6-11 NIV)

These words are directed first of all at the landowners and landgrabbers Micah attacked in verses 1-5 and then at the false prophets who exonerate them. Of course, it was entirely predictable that there would be an adverse reaction against Micah’s condemnation of the rich and powerful. Established religion generally favours the rich and powerful as Amos had discovered some years earlier when his prophecies were opposed by the chief priest of the Bethel sanctuary, who was financially dependent on the king. Established religion generally has vested interests.

Here the attack is against the prophets who tamely and falsely prophecy what the rich landowners and landgrabbers want to hear. Micah is fighting against two sets of enemies who are in an unholy alliance. Apparently Micah is one amongst a small number of true prophets, but their preaching is banned as verse 6 tells us.

Micah is not accepting this for a moment, he counters their ‘no’ with a stronger ‘no’. In verse 7 he says his words do good to those who truly follow the ways of the Lord. Whereas, the false prophecy of plenty of wine and beer for the wealthy landgrabbers, which is, of course, fully accepted by them, even though it is completely false. The false prophets falsely apply ‘truth’ like Job’s comforters. Yes the nation of Israel was and is God’s chosen people, but that doesn’t mean that they can sin as they like. In fact being the covenant people places heavier responsibilities upon them. As Israel well knew when they accepted God’s covenant at Mount Sinai, breaking the covenant would lead to God’s curse and punishment. Micah points out that he is addressing a divided nation – the rich minority and the false prophets who support them on the one hand and the poor downtrodden majority on the other hand. The rich and powerful and indeed their false prophets, have, by their actions, stepped outside the blessings of the covenant and made themselves subject to its curses.

Micah's rivals have an incorrect understanding of the covenant, they have fallen into the trap of only recognising a part of the truth rather than accepting what Paul calls "the whole counsel of God" in Acts 20:27. They had raised the divine promise of the covenant to the level of an absolute promise, ignoring the attached commitment to keep God's laws. They wanted to chain God to their service whilst disregarding their own responsibilities.

In the New Testament, Matthew says much the same thing: "By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16 NIV)

The last two verses of our reading seem a little strange: "I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people. One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head." (Micah 2:12-13 NIV)

Sudden transitions from judgement to salvation are fairly common in the prophetic books of the Bible and this is one such transition.

Here Yahweh speaks of bringing the true Israelites together, but there are so few true Israelites that they are described as a remnant. We can see this as God protecting his faithful ones from the Assyrians. The Assyrian army never entered Jerusalem, but packed up and marched away, leaving Jerusalem in peace until the arrival of the Babylonians much later. This in itself was a prophetic vision of Micah, which did indeed come to pass.

But, you know, I can't help thinking that verse 13 was perhaps a greater prophetic vision of Micah. A prophetic vision of what Christ would accomplish seven hundred years later. Christ led his people, the righteous remnant, out through the gate of death and into his kingdom of eternal life.

That brings me back to the beginning of my sermon. As I said, those who are true Christians are saved by the blood of Christ. Christ died for our sins if we turn to him and acknowledge his saving death and accept him as our Lord and master. But, can we really claim to have accepted Christ as our Lord and master, if we not only continue to sin, but deliberately plot and plan further and greater sins. I don't think so. So let us all repent of our sins and turn again to Christ, asking him to sanctify us in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we may come nearer to having Christ's nature day by day. We'll never fully achieve being like Christ in this life, but we can move closer to that ideal and get ready for the last day when we will be made truly Christ like.