

## Readings for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

29<sup>th</sup> January 2023

### First Reading: Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the case of the LORD,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth,  
for the LORD has a case against his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,  
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”

“With what shall I come before the LORD  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

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?

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

#### Gospel: St Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

#### **A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Our Gospel passage today is the opening part of the Sermon on the Mount, a compilation of Jesus' core teaching. It is the first of five long discourses into which Matthew gathers Jesus' essential teaching and serves to introduce much of what follows. These opening verses are known as the Beatitudes – nine pronouncements which all start with the word 'Blessed'; pronouncements of divine favour, although in circumstances that do not appear to us to be particularly favourable. But, every so often, we come across someone who manages to show us how these seemingly strange blessings are true.

I know a lady, whom I am privileged to call a friend, whose life story contains just about all those elements of a dysfunctional society that none of us would ever wish for in anyone's life. At times in her life, she would have

considered herself poor in spirit, she has mourned losses many times over, considered herself of little consequence, and has felt persecuted and spoken against falsely at times. And yet, she has come to recognise herself as accepted and loved by God and others, and she is full of joy, committed to helping others facing similar situations, despite still having considerable hardship in her life. She would describe herself as 'blessed' and, for me, her story epitomises the meaning of the Beatitudes.

Last week, we heard about the call of the first disciples, a call that Jesus extends to all of us: 'Follow me'. If we choose to follow Jesus, we can expect to be blessed – right? Well, that depends on what you mean by 'blessed'. If you understand blessing to be that all good things will come your way in this life – what some call the 'prosperity Gospel' – then the evidence shows us that this doesn't follow, even though some people think that faith should work like that. But if we look at the Beatitudes, we see that Jesus takes the long view and looks beyond our everyday concerns to set them in the context of God's coming kingdom. As my friend has found, that doesn't mean that we have to wait for eternal life to be, and feel, blessed. The joy of the presence of God in God's kingdom is both 'now and not yet': Jesus inaugurated God's kingdom, and we may experience its blessings even though that kingdom has not yet reached its fulfilment. To use the language of today's New Testament reading, the blessings in the Beatitudes may look like foolishness to us but they have God's wisdom at their heart.

Paul develops this idea of God's wisdom appearing foolish to humans, telling us that God appears to have acted foolishly in two ways. Firstly, by using the Cross as the instrument of salvation, because crucifixion was a shameful way to die for the Jews, even as a consequence of standing up for what was right, and because it was symbol of superior Roman power against those who opposed them. And secondly, God appears to have acted foolishly by entrusting the spreading of the message of salvation through that Cross to an imperfect church; a church that was neither rich nor powerful, and that also squabbled amongst itself and was divided by loyalties to different leaders.

Paul was writing to challenge a church very much influenced by the status-conscious Roman world in which competition for social honour was normal. That society embraced the *cursus honorum* – literally translated 'course of honours' – a sequence of public positions of increasing importance for aspiring politicians, based on patronage. This ran deep in Corinth and boasting about one's accomplishments, often in an exaggerated manner, was normal. It was a sensible path, a wise way to proceed for those who wanted to get on. But Paul is telling them that this status-driven culture is not God's way and, throughout this letter, he turns those norms upside down. As he says: 'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' He does not condemn the seeking of high office, but calls his audience to recognise that all are equal under God and that what God values is a heart turned towards God and therefore also towards all of God's world.

And Paul urges them to 'consider your own call brothers and sisters', reminding them that few were wise by human standards, or powerful or of noble birth, yet they were chosen by God. It re-echoes what we heard last week, that the people God calls to follow him are ordinary, humble people; that they don't need to be rich, powerful or clever. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to humility based on the foolishness of the Cross and God's choice of them for God's mission in the world.

This call to humility also comes through in the reading from Micah. He lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, around the same time as Isaiah and Hosea. During his lifetime, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was attacked and destroyed, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was besieged, both by the Assyrians, this being seen as God's punishment.

We only hear a reading from Micah's prophecies three times in the whole of our three-year lectionary cycle. This scene is presented as a courtroom drama in which God is in contention with the people. The earth itself is called as witness as God recalls specific persons and places, to remind the people of God's leadership, favour and mercy from their earliest days. Then we have the human response – with what shall we appease God? The suggestions range from the commonplace to the extreme. Then, finally, we come to the conclusion or judgment, a well-known and much-loved verse: '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?'

After the passage we have today, Micah goes on to lament all the unjust and unkind practices of the people. For it is a human reality that, even when people are doing their best, we get it wrong sometimes. We don't always make good decisions and we all suffer from unconscious biases. However, having the humility to be aware of these things is the first step to improvement. Asking ourselves if this or that course of action is fair or kind may not change the world, but it has the potential to make a difference to those in our small corner of it, and to bring God's blessing into peoples' lives in surprising circumstances.

Although I am sure she would not recognise it in herself, and although I am also sure she sometimes slips up because she is human, through the challenges and hardships she has faced in life, my friend has learnt how to live according to that judgment in Micah, and to bring blessing to others in difficult circumstances.

'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.'