

Sermon on Micah
I have Shown You, O Mortal, What is Good

When I was a boy, if I was doing the wrong thing, my parents would often say to me, 'you're skirting on the edge'.

You can probably remember your parents saying similar things.

It meant you were coming close to the mark, close to the point of no return.

And perhaps it was time to back off.

Keep going in that direction and there might be real trouble.

It bothers me somewhat that I find myself saying something similar to our kids.

But that space, the space of being on the edge was pregnant with potential, even when we were being disobedient.

It was a place and moment of danger and expectation.

With one further wrong move, we children could find ourselves in deep strife.

Where there could be deep consequences, at least in the exaggerated perceptions of childhood.

A step, a word, a look in the wrong direction and the wrath of the higher power could be brought down upon us.

There was a kind of electricity.

We often, of course, regularly stepped over the line and bore the consequences, as ministers kids are want to do.

The voice of the prophet comes from the edge.

The edge of the community of faith, the edge of the world, and the edge of the potentiality of God.

It comes from that place of pregnant possibility where the word of the Lord threatens to burst through into the present moment and disrupt everything.

The moment is ripe, just waiting for God's harvest, God's acting, God's breaking in.

It is a thin moment, like the Celtic Christians describe thin places.

Moments where the line between the here and now and eternity is very thin, very transparent.

Skirting on the edge.

The witness of the prophet Micah begins with these words: *'The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth... the vision he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Hear you peoples, all of you listen, earth and heaven that the Sovereign Lord may witness against you, the Lord from his holy Temple.'*

This is some beginning. Something's going to happen now we begin to imagine, something from which things probably won't be the same.

The prophet speaks from the intersection of the word of the Lord, the life of the people, and the holy call of God to be faithful.

The edge.

The thin place where the hope and judgement, anger and mercy, love and discipline of God meet.

And the world will be changed as the word goes forth.

And the people of God will be changed.

Like John the Baptist, the voice from the wilderness speaking, prepare ye the way of the Lord.

It is in the moment of crisis that the voice of the prophet rises up.

The voice from the edge is not a voice for the everyday, the mundane, when life is humming along in its comfortable routines.

Bonhoeffer, like Paul, spoke from his prison cell, when all the foundations on which he had thought the world was built had crumbled away in the face of Nazism.

He spoke to a world 'come of age' as he said, a world which was now forced to face the reality of the lesser angels of human nature.

And the destruction human beings can inflict on each other.

Martin Luther spoke as the Medieval church, rotten with corruption and nepotism, was disowning its own eternal inheritance.

He called it back to Scripture and the self abnegating way of the cross, the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross through which it would relocate its salvation.

It was, of course, from the cross itself, the ultimate place on the edge, the ultimate thin place, that the greatest prophet of all time spoke.

Speaking, as he had with his life, now with his selfless death to save all the world.

Jesus spoke God's word, of course, but more than this, he was and is God's word in the flesh.

Our flesh by which we are healed of our sin and shame.

He stepped into the human crisis from the edge of eternity.

For the prophet Micah, living in the late 8th BC, he faced a world of great threat and danger as we've heard.

The Assyrian empire, the great superpower of its era, had toppled Samaria in the north and was threatening Jerusalem in the south.

The people of God had been disobedient and unfaithful and were now reaping the whirlwind.

In Micah's time the cause and effect of these things was obvious.

He didn't have our modern caution when it comes to seeing the judgement of God alive in the fluctuations of history.

'The Lord has a case against his people.', he writes, 'He is lodging a charge against Israel.'

Prophets weren't seeking approval from the people, but from God.

Invariably, of course, their message made them less, not more popular.

Those in power don't like pesky voices from the edge disrupting their easy status quo.

The prophet's currency isn't worldly favour, but eternal truth.

It was the word of the Lord they sought to set forth into the crisis moment, and that is a blade with two sharp edges. It cuts.

And it places its messenger on the edge, in the uncomfortable place of telling truth to power.

In Micah 6, best known for its soaring 8th verse, the oracle records a trial.

Hear you mountains, the Lord's accusation.

Look what I have done for you, the Lord says.

Don't you remember how I brought you out of Egypt to restoration?

I sent Moses and Miriam and Aaron?

Don't you remember my mighty acts in days gone by?

The people of God were like a wayward child.

They too were skirting on the edge like we had as children.

They had fallen away and now were on trial with God.

And in the face of the accusation the prophet on the edge and the threat of impending destruction there was some soul searching to be done.

With what shall I come before the Lord? What shall I offer my God?

He asks the question that the holy community has asked right down to this day, what does it mean to be faithful?

Will Willimon makes the point that we have been in error if we have thought the prophetic task was only given to certain persons.

That right back in Micah's day and to this present time the people of God were called to be a prophetic community.

A people on the edge.

A people crying out in the wilderness of the nations seeking after God's way.

And it was a reflection of how much they had failed that prophets like Micah were called to speak a realigning word from the Lord.

To call them back to their central task of being light and salt in the world.

You're not the centre, Micah wants to say, God is.

And being centred in him may well put you on the edge of the world.

The destruction and exile that befell them at different points was the punishment they had brought on themselves.

Miss the mark, Micah wants to say, and there will be consequences.

This was the prophetic word of God, what the hymn writer calls, 'challenge and choice'.

It was not a human word, but the voice of God's divine purpose coming forth.

So the prophet's first task was to listen.

To keep quiet and wait.

To wait for that breaking through of God into prophetic speech.

The prophet is finally compelled to say something, but he must never forget that in the first place it is God who speaks.

The prophet is God's holy messenger.

If you read through Micah, at a number of points he writes, 'Listen'.

Listen for the word of the Lord.

Listen for the voice of your God and mine and then be ready to obey.

To speak. Then be ready to go as you are called.

Micah was a country boy and (I'm probably a little biased here), but generally country folk are the best listeners in my experience.

There's something about having your livelihood depend on the weather that inculcates a certain humility.

You can't contrive things to your own agenda so quickly.

Waiting, watching, listening. It comes with the territory.

Before the prophet speaks, he must listen, just as the prophetic community must.

Listen for the word of the Lord and where it might be calling out into the world.

In my experience anyway there are lots of times I wish it was a little clearer.

God's voice often seems muffled to me, but no doubt the fault lies on my side.

God is always speaking after all.

Right back in the beginning we're told, 'God said... let there be light, and there was light.'

We have this great chronicle of God's speaking in the Bible, we have the cloud of witnesses in the church over generations, and we have the living Word Jesus Christ constantly by our side.

Our constant companion.

It's my listening that needs to improve.

Our listening.

In order that we might speak a word from the Lord as God's prophetic community, should we be so blessed as to receive one.

Micah faced the Assyrian threat, and grappled with Israel's disobedience.

We face different threats but no less demanding, almost all of which stem from our constant inclination towards our own preferences.

Our own self serving ways.

A footballer this week was transferred between two European teams for the princely sum of \$330M... meanwhile children are starving in northern Africa.

A third of a billion dollars, for one man.

If we are listening to the cries of the world and for the voice of God, such things will give us a holy discomfort.

A world built on such priorities will make us uncomfortable.

This is where the voice of the prophets and the prophetic community come into play.

The voice from the edge.

This is where the prophet speaks.

Maybe that money would be better spent feeding people? Clothing people?

Maybe if we weren't all so ready to consume as fast as we can, a different kind of conversation could be had?

A new day might dawn? We might even find ourselves more fulfilled?

After posing the question to himself, the prophet answers it himself in verse 8 of ch 6.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? But to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

The simplicity and poetry of this verse have made it a favourite summary of the life of faith for Jews and Christians alike.

Three very important Hebrew concepts found in that verse.

Justice, loving kindness, humility, all of which are characteristics of God.

You don't need fancy liturgies, or elaborate sacrifices.

Goodness is not found in great wealth or position or power.

But rather in the humble and faithful life of walking in God's way.

This is Micah's call back to the centre, the centre of God's own life.

This is the word of the Lord he speaks, having listened.

This is how he says to wayward Israel, remember your calling.

Remember who you are supposed to be, where you have come from, and where you should be going.

Remember how I called you to care for widows and orphans, for those most vulnerable, for the hurting and sick.

Remember how your life is to be given in service for one another and for the world.

This is who you actually are, if you only act like it.

We do well to remember that prophets and prophetic communities of faith come in all shapes and sizes.

There's no one model of the prophet.

It's not how they look, it's the word they receive and speak that makes a difference.

It's the word of their life given over in its commitments to God.

It's the community of faith in the far reaches of the world serving and loving the lost.

It's the voice on the edge, which turns out to be the centre of God's will and life.

For the church, for us, receiving a voice like Micah's should spur us into a deeper listening, in order we pray to speak a deeper word.

A word of Jesus.

And we do this by living our lives and our collective faith in the way of God's justice, loving kindness, and humility.

There are no shortage of crises engulfing our world, our community, as I said.

The reserves of human selfishness run deep.

Fortunately, the word of the Lord is deeper, far deeper.

And in listening for that word, as Micah did all those centuries ago, we too may have something to say.

It begins in humility, though, and we should never forget that we sit under God's searing call as much as we may be bearers of it.

The word of the Lord must drive deep down in our hearts before we can imagine speaking at all.

Our first job is to listen.

Yet it is a feature of prophetic literature that it always brings a note of hope amid the challenge of listening and acting.

The voice on the edge is a hopeful voice.

And in ch 4, Micah envisages what the hopeful future of God's word might look like.

A time of no more war, no more violence, a time of renewal and peace.

This is the hope of all the world... and ours today as well.

So it is with these words today that I close, words from many generations ago, that are as relevant today as ever... Micah 4: 2-5.

Amen.