

## January 30, 2011 The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

4 Epiphany: Micah6:1-8 Psalm 15 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 Matthew 5:1-12

One day, a rabbi from Eastern Europe was so troubled by the problems people in his synagogue were experiencing and by problems in the world that he went out for a walk, to talk with God.

He was so focused on his conversation with God that he lost track of where he was walking. Inadvertently he walked onto a military installation on the edge of town. A soldier barked out at him: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" The question jolted the rabbi and he asked, "What did you say?" "Who are you and what are you doing here?" The rabbi paused and asked, "Do they pay you to ask those questions?" The soldier replied, "What do you mean?" The rabbi said, "I need someone to ask me those questions every day." Who are you and what are you doing here?

The Scripture readings for today are profound reminders from God about who we are and why we are here. In the first reading, Micah reminded the people of Israel that they had forgotten that they were created and loved by God and that God had expectations about how they should live with God and their neighbors. Instead, they ignored God and were only living for themselves, doing what they wanted to do. So God spoke to them through Micah. "God has told you what is good, what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." Notice, God did not require them to force other people and groups to act more justly.

God called them as individuals and as a community to do justice in the context of their daily lives. God also expects us to do justice as a daily practice in all our relationships, with the people we live with and work with, in the community, the nation and world. And, for the good of all people, God requires that we love kindness.

Have you noticed that some people who are passionate about justice are not very kind? With a few wonderful exceptions, the people I've known who have been most passionate about justice have also been outraged at people who disagree with their picture of justice. They have aggressively attacked those who differ from them. Think about the political rhetoric in recent election campaigns. Think about the verbal assaults we hear on radio and TV talk shows. We as a nation, we as Christians in relationship with each other, seem to have forgotten that God requires us to do justice and at the same time to practice respectful loving kindness toward everyone, including our enemies. And Micah adds a third spiritual practice: walk humbly with God.

Today many people think of God as a theory we can choose to believe or not. For some God is a doctrine they agree with or not, a code of ethics they accept or reject. But Micah says, we are here to walk humbly with God, to live in moment-by-moment relationship with our Creator, recognizing that God is God, and we are not God but placed here to listen to and obey God. We are here to live in loving harmony with God and our neighbors and all of God's creation. For Micah, it's all about appropriate relationships.

Most of us are familiar with these words of Micah. But if we are honest, none of us have ever lived one day fully practicing what God requires of us. Living this way involves a moment-by-moment connection with the God. If you and I do not have interaction with God throughout each

day, we will not be able to imagine, let alone practice doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

For example, this week, a friend of mine lost his job very unexpectedly. The rejection and loss was raw when I talked with him just a few hours later. He was not just angry, he was raging! He was bleeding emotionally. How could the people he had worked with so closely betray him like this? He asked me to pray that God would help him go to the board meeting the next day and act with appropriate kindness and respect as they announced his replacement, while he was still raging inside.

Fortunately, my friend practices daily prayer, meditation and reflection on Scripture. He is involved in an AA community that supports and holds him accountable for letting go and letting God guide his life. I was amazed that in his pain and rage, he still remembered who God made him to be and what God required of him in this situation. The next day, he reported that God gave him grace to act with kindness and dignity at the Board meeting. He began to see how God could bring good out of this painful loss. My friend experienced what is true for all of us: we cannot actually do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, in the painful realities of life, without daily spiritual practices that help us stay aware of God's constant presence. We also need a community to talk and pray with, to support us and hold us accountable for living a Jesus way of life in the realities of each day.

In today's Gospel, Jesus also gives us a summary of the lifestyle God created us to live. The Beatitudes have had a profound impact on Christians through the centuries. In every generation, this Jesus-way of living is counter-cultural to the human drive for power and control, for increasing money and possessions and keeping up a successful image. Jesus was talking with people who were controlled every day by Roman soldiers who had invaded their country and demanded that they pay exorbitant taxes to the Roman Empire. It was in this context of daily oppression that Jesus said, "You are blessed when you recognize your spiritual poverty." The message translation reads: "You are blessed when you're at the end of your rope with less of you; there is more space for God and God's rule in your life. You're blessed when you get your inside world, your mind and heart, put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom."

This is the peacemaking lifestyle, the "walking-humbly-with-God" way of life God put us here to live. In every generation a few ordinary people hear these words of Jesus, and feel compelled to try to live this way. They quickly recognize that they cannot even begin to live this way, without God's help. For example, the injustice of South African apartheid was overcome by ordinary followers of Jesus, black and white, who practiced this "Beatitudes-way-of-life" in community. They prayed together, wept together, and reflected together on the vision God gives in Scripture of who they were and why God put them here. They dared to live against the grain of their nation's laws and power structure. Acutely aware of their spiritual poverty, they depended on God for help. Through long painful struggle, God freed them, beginning from

within their church community, and extending into their daily relationships in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

This morning, Micah and Jesus invite us to think of the complex challenges of our nation and world in a new way. Do you have much hope that any political party or any government will be able to enact good solutions to the enormously complex challenges that haunt our nation and world? The power blocs, self-interest groups, and greed for money are too strong and the rhetoric is too toxic and filled with partisan dis-information. Most of us are too self-centered to think and act sacrificially, for the good of all, at the expense of our own convenience.

But I see hope. What if, like in Micah's time, we, who claim to be God's people, are really the primary problem? We have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten why God put us here. What if, in the little interactions of our daily lives, we keep turning to God, asking God to help us do justice, love, kindness, and walk humbly with God? What if we recognize our spiritual poverty and, depending on God's help day by day, in little ways, we begin to let God change our values and priorities, change the quality of conversations we have in our neighborhoods and workplaces?

Francis of Assisi simply tried to live the Beatitudes, to humbly love God and his neighbor. He reached out personally to touch and listen to the poor of his community. He tried to bring God's peace to every person he met. Ordinary people found his radically different way of life attractive and began to gather in small communities to live this Jesus way of peace and loving simplicity, embracing spiritual and material poverty as a way that would lead to life. Through the simple, peacemaking lives of Franciscans, God gradually transformed the whole social structure of feudalism in 13th Century Europe. Jesus' alternative way of living was more attractive than the feudal way of living.

I wonder, is God inviting us to begin in small communities within each congregation, including interested people from outside our congregations, to help each other enter into a spiritual recovery movement from our unmanageable lives? Might we begin by asking God to help us overcome our addiction to the toxic values and rhetoric of American society and to instead, seek to live the vision of Micah and the vision of Jesus in the Beatitudes?

Let us pray: In the silence, allow the love of God to soak into every part of your being. What changes might Jesus be asking you to make in your life this week, so that you can embrace your spiritual poverty and let God help you take new steps in doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?