

Micah 3

This week we've been shocked and horrified as the tanks have rolled. Explosions and gunfire have filled our screens. A picture of an elderly woman, her head bandaged and blood all over her face is imprinted on my mind. As you watch the pictures, you can smell the fear; you can taste the dread. Oh, how our hearts go out to the people of the Ukraine.

How do you react when the strong trample the weak? How do you feel when the powerful stamp on those who are helpless? What is your reaction when you witness monstrous injustice – or when you experience it yourself? Whether it is in Ukraine, or domestic abuse, or a gross abuse of power in the workplace?

Last week we met some crooked rulers and some lying preachers. The rich and the powerful were running a racket; they were stealing land, kicking people out of their homes. They'd bought the judges and they were systematically seizing fields and thieving smallholdings. That's the sort of thing that should upset us. It is not right. And we saw that God was not happy.

God warned in chapters 1 & 2 that because of the people's scandalous behaviour, judgement was coming. God will judge, and afterwards he will step in to rescue his people. Judgement first, followed by salvation.

Jeremiah 26v16-19 locates the situation into which Micah first preached chapter 3. Hezekiah is king, and the date must be close to 701BC, something like 35 years after Micah preached chapter 1. Chapter 1v6 had already come true by this time. For in 722BC, Samaria was destroyed. The Assyrians had invaded, and the people of the

Northern Kingdom had been carried off wholesale into captivity.

And now, in 701BC, as we read chapter 3, chapter 1v8-16 is coming true. King Sennacherib of Assyria is invading Judah and is advancing on Jerusalem. You can read about it in 2 Kings chapters 18 & 19.

So this week, time has moved on from where we were last week. Time has moved on, but the leaders don't appear to have changed. The accusation against them today is that they are cannibals. They are child-eaters. 3v1-3 *"Then I said, Listen, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel. Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot."*

Our stomachs churn just at the thought of it. The accusation from God is graphic and horrific. God says that they are butchers. Butchers who are getting fat by eating others.

I think that this is hyperbole. Cannibalism here is a graphic metaphor for the oppression of the rulers. In a subsistence, agrarian society, your land is everything. You eat what you can grow. When a farmer is robbed of his land, so it follows that he and his children will then starve. And Micah points out that when the rulers grow fat on the proceeds of their theft – well, they might just as well have cooked and eaten those children themselves. That way they cut out the middle man. It's as if they were literally eating those people. Chopping them up, popping them in a pot, and wolfing them down.

What is even more shocking, is that these rulers are not atheists; they are religious people. In verse 4, these are people who cry out to the Lord. Indeed, verse 11 makes clear that they think that God is on their side; and that he will go on rescuing them.

But God will not. The Lord hates this behaviour; he cares deeply about the suffering; and he will judge people who behave like this. His response to these leaders – even though they claim to be his people – is that He will have nothing to do with them. V4 *“Then they [the rulers] will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done.”*

God is appalled and revolted by these people, and he has utterly rejected them.

Micah’s name means *“Who is like Yahweh?”* And that is what the book is about. What kind of a God is He?

Well the Lord knows about your suffering; he is not blind to it and he will not leave it unpunished. The good news is that God knows; he sees; and he is committed to action. We do not have to take revenge ourselves when we are on the receiving end of monstrous injustice. God himself will act. We can trust in Him to do that. And remember, after judgement, comes mercy and rescue. God is just and God is merciful. He will deal with all wrongdoing, and he will forgive His people’s sin.

In v5 Micah’s thoughts turn to the prophets. To the preachers of God’s word. And he highlights that they have been completely bribed. If you feed the preachers, then they will give you a nice message from God. *“Peace”,* they’ll say. *“Don’t worry. God loves you. There is nothing to fear....”*

But if you don’t feed them, Micah points out, then the message they will give you is one of *“war”*. These preachers and prophets are speakers for hire; they’ll give nice comforting words to you if you are nice to them; but woe betide you if you don’t look after them! If you don’t grease their palm, they’ll blast you; they’ll condemn you.

Many of us will have seen American tele-evangelists at work, with their white teeth and their sharp suits. Hectoring, bullying, wheedling and extorting money from their congregations. *“If you give to our ministry then God will bless you; he’ll heal you; he’ll make you rich. And if you won’t support our ministry – well don’t be surprised if God does not bless you; you will stay sick; you won’t succeed in your career....”*

They take money from the people who can least afford it. They offer false hope to their supporters; and they threaten bad things for those who will not line their pockets. A pastor’s job is to care for the sheep, but these prophets just fleece them. It makes us sick; it is disgusting.

And as with the leaders, the punishment fits the crime. V6-7 *“Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them. The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will cover their faces because there is no answer from God.”*

They sold answers from God, and now they will no longer hear from him. Terrifyingly, the judgement implies that these people had once been genuine prophets. They’d been true believers; keen Christians. But they had sold God out. They have betrayed God and they exploit God’s people.

Surely God is right to abandon them. *“Who is like Yahweh?”* What kind of a God is He? The Lord cares deeply about false clergy; and he cares deeply for those that they lie to.

By contrast, we see Micah. **V8** *“But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, and Israel his sin.”*

The mark of a true prophet and of a faithful preacher is that they will tell people about their sin. They will warn about God’s judgement. And they won’t duck the task even when there are rich or influential people, who might be offended.

We don’t often want to hear about sin and judgement. It is uncomfortable. It certainly doesn’t make the preacher popular. It can result in the vicar getting a bad name for himself in the village. *“Tell us something nice and comforting vicar, and we will be nice to you”*, is the deal that we offer. *“We’ll speak well of you, if you tell us that basically we are OK”*. And for this preacher, the thing that is most likely to bribe me, is praise. We want to be liked; to be popular; to have nice things said about us.

Please pray for your preachers that we won’t be bribed; that we won’t change our message to please our hearers. Please pray that instead, we’d be those who will preach *“the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”*.

“Who is like Yahweh?” The good news is that God knows; he sees; and he is committed to action. Take comfort; trust in Him. And remember, after judgement, comes mercy and rescue.

V9-12 is a summary of v1-8. And it finishes with a final pronouncement of judgement in

v12. There is no safety for a city built of the blood of the innocent. Micah says that the same judgement that fell on Samaria will fall on Jerusalem. It will be totally destroyed.

In these verses we see that there are two contrasting views of God. Some believe in a ‘3v11 God’; a God who promises never to bring disaster; a God who will never act in judgement. *“No disaster will come upon us”* they say. But Micah tells us about a God who cares about justice. And it is precisely because he cares about justice, that God announces that he will destroy Jerusalem. God’s city and his temple will be destroyed; it appears that God no longer will live with His people.

Now, Jeremiah 26 tells us how King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem responded to this sermon. They repented. They begged God to have mercy. They truly turned to the Lord, and we are told that God relented of the disaster pronounced by Micah. 2,723 years ago, this sermon was preached. Wonderfully, at that time the people did repent. And God defeated the Assyrians in 701BC, as a result of that repentance. Jerusalem, for a time at least, was spared.

Micah is a book written to those who have remained true to God. It is a book about the character of our God. The victims of injustice are listening in as God talks about their abusers. What sort of a God do we serve? *“Who is like Yahweh?”* The Lord hates injustice. He will act in judgement on the abusive leader and on the crooked preacher. Hold firm dear friends. Hold firm to the Lord. For he is good, all the time. And all the time, he is good.

Let us pray.