



Sermon preached by Revd Rose Westwood on 1st February 2026

Readings: *Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12*

Epiphany IV

Covenantal Grace

...what God longs for on the part of those who come to worship is not outward show, but changed and redirected lives.¹

Introduction:

How do you measure success?

Is it by the size of house, or the type of car a person owns? Is it by the level of achievement in academia or the workplace? Is it through fame and fortune and the honours systems?

Someone said to me the other day, that they were truly blessed. So I asked them to describe what that looked like. It was about having a comfortable lifestyle with all the things they could have wished for. Earlier in our worship, we looked at Ken Dodd's definition of what it truly meant to be blessed, and it seemed to offer another version of life.

Whilst humanity tends to define itself through commodity and consumerism, scripture holds up the cross; which through human eyes appears to be a symbol of defeat; as an anathema in a success orientated society. Or as St Paul put it: God takes the low and despised, the weak and the foolish to confound the wise and the mighty.²

Had we read 1 Corinthians 1 in worship this morning, we would have been confronted with a revolutionary text, overturning the understanding of humanity, and refocussing our vision through the lenses of God's transformative power and gracious intervention.

So, let's look at the two passages of scripture we did hear. And discover how they both define the way of life that best reflects God's design for humanity.

1. A triad of covenantal possibilities

Eight centuries before Christ, Micah the prophet imagines a court room scene: God the Almighty versus the people.

The defence is outlined: God has brought the people out of Egypt and made them into a covenant people. A history of generosity and liberation still commemorated every Passover, and which still acts as a model for all God's saving acts.

Yet the people have not made a true response to these saving acts; so, verses 4-5 act as a 'shorthand' for the history of Israel. God has faithfully been the saviour of the people; but they have wanted to appease the Almighty with an offering of possessions and external ostentation.

Yet their questions reveal how far their understanding lacks any real sense of the change of lifestyle that God requires. In fact, the more you examine what they are offering, it sounds more like the worship of their neighbours to false gods: – burnt offerings, animal sacrifice, rivers of oil, or even the sacrifice of the eldest child. Such offerings were fine in all the surrounding cultures of the day, but wholly inappropriate for the worship of the one true God.

¹ James Newsome, in *Texts for Preaching, Year A*. [ed. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverley R Gaventa, James D Newsome] (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 121

² 1 Corinthians 1:20-25

What God requires is ‘a triad of covenantal possibilities’ (Brueggemann, 120) - a complete refocusing of life, a change of priorities: to do justice, to love covenant loyalty and to walk humbly with God.

The prophet’s answer reflects his principal theme of justice: mercy, or kindness, is shown to be the partner to justice.

Commentators frequently translate ‘to walk humbly’ as ‘to walk carefully, prudently’. But this actually goes much further than humility, by suggesting that justice and mercy depend on people being considered and careful about how they build a just and loving future.

Or perhaps as the Psalmist puts it:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Psalm 85:10

That is to say, Micah’s vision is not one blinkered by rose-tinted glasses, it is realistic: that any community striving to bring justice and mercy into being, is one in which true reconciliation following a great injustice must be carefully nurtured, just as you might give time and care to a very delicate plant.

And it is the imagery of ‘walking’ that serves as a great reminder that we are called to journey towards building a world in which justice and mercy are the building blocks.

But please note: this is an invitation to admire justice and mercy from a distance, each statement contains a verb – which we all learnt to recognise at school as ‘doing’ words.

DO justice

LOVE covenant loyalty

WALK humbly with God

2. **The summary of the Law**

The Psalmist sets the ethical framework of justice and righteousness, within the context of worship. True worship, the psalmist argues, is always about our relationship with God and relationship with others:

Psalm 15 Who Shall Abide in God’s Sanctuary?

A Psalm of David.

1 O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your holy hill?

2 Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right
and speak the truth from their heart;

3 who do not slander with their tongue
and do no evil to their friends
nor heap shame upon their neighbours;

4 in whose eyes the wicked are despised
but who honour those who fear the Lord;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

5 who do not lend money at interest
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The psalmist moves from the law court imagery of Micah to the liturgy for entering the temple (cf. Psalm 24) where a dialogue takes place between the custodian of the house of God and those who

come to worship. Now, I'm not suggesting that the church elders interrogate the congregation when they arrive for worship, but this Psalm undoubtedly places the question on the lips of the priest enquiring of the congregation: what lies behind your intention to enter the sacred space? It is a question, however, that we are invited to contemplate on entering the community-space and prepare for worship.

True worship is always described as dwelling in the presence of God; where hearts are orientated towards the divine. It is as if love for the beloved desires to be in their presence.

It takes us back to those ancient words from the Pentateuch, where we are invited to love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and loving your neighbour as you love yourself (Exodus 20:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21).

*...what God longs for on the part of those who come to worship is not outward show, but changed and redirected lives.*³ Cf. Amos 5:21, 24; Jeremiah 7:4 (cf Jeremiah 7:1-15 and 26:1-6)

Worship must be accompanied by a commitment to social and personal justice. The commitment to compassion and justice is framed within a liturgical setting. That is to say, that what we think about today in church should enable us to go out and act towards bringing true justice and freedom for all.

3. **The blessings**

And so, finally to the Beatitudes, which follow on well from both the prophet and the Psalmist, reflecting centuries of Jewish teaching and ethics. (For example, Job 5: 17, Psalm 84: 4-5, and Daniel 12: 12.)

To be truly happy or blessed comes about as lives become orientated Godwards:

'Poor in spirit' is best interpreted as humility: Isaiah 66 (vv 1-2) speaks of the worship God demands

Thus says the LORD:

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool;

what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place?

All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD.

But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit,

who trembles at my word.

'Those who mourn' refers to the suffering righteous. Isaiah spoke of those mourning in Zion, who knew that things were not as God intended, but in their righteousness waited for God's deliverance (Isaiah 61: 1-3; 66: 10).

'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth' is almost a direct quotation of Psalm 37: 11. Each of these beatitudes builds on the previous one, for this Psalm exhorts faithfulness and trust in God - perhaps an antidote to anxiety and concern over the state of the world?

And these characteristics all find their root in blessed are the merciful ..

For mercy is a characteristic of God himself (Psalm 145: 9).

A great deal of emphasis has always been laid upon the beatitudes as moral exhortation to the faithful. But actually, the real focus of the Beatitudes is to be able to recognise the blessing promised by God, and the direction of God's blessings:

'God is a God who cares about the poor in spirit, the humble, those yearning for right to be done, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

³ James Newsome, in *Texts for Preaching, Year A*. [ed. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverley R Gaventa, James D Newsome] (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 121

To read this passage with any seriousness, is to read a description of God's concern which carries an expression of the God who stands with the vulnerable, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised in every day and age. The people of God are therefore invited into a covenantal relationship with God which seeks to establish new criteria for human relationships; built on justice and righteousness and mercy. Or as one hymn writer put it:

*Hear the call of the kingdom, lift your eyes to the King;
let his song rise within you as a fragrant offering
of how God rich in mercy came in Christ to redeem all who trust in His unfailing grace.
Hear the call of the Kingdom to be children of light with the mercy of heaven, the humility of Christ
walking justly before him, loving all that is right that the life of Christ may shine through us*

May we too be able to respond:

*King of Heaven we will answer the call. We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim salvation in Jesus 'name
Hear the call of the Kingdom to reach out to the lost with the Father 's compassion in the wonder
of the cross, bringing peace and forgiveness, and a hope yet to come: let the nations put their
trust in Him.⁴*

Being blessed is surely an ability to respond to the call of God; to bring peace, forgiveness and hope, in a world that sadly has a great need of these at the moment.

Rose Westwood
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⁴ Words and music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend copyright © 2006 thankyou music StF 407