

St Andrew's Chesterton

Palm Sunday 2013

In the eighth century before Christ there was a burgeoning industry of what we might call today New Age spirituality. Diviners, seers and prophets were all part of the same spectrum; they saw visions and dreamed dreams, they looked for signs in the skies, on the palms of hands and in the carcasses of animals and, if they had had them, they would have looked for them in teapots. The people we now think of as the prophets were marginal figures, unpopular doom and gloom merchants though revered and feared nonetheless. We now remember Isaiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah from that time, though their utterances and their visions were but a few amongst the many who had more palatable messages for their hearers. Their words survive, treasured by generations of disciples and followers until the day of their vindication. Only history would decide whether this prophet or that told and foretold the truth, just as it is only history that vindicates or otherwise the prophets of our time. The jury was out on Micah – like the other uncomfortable prophets he was not much rated in his time, a thorn in the side of the rich and powerful and a champion of the poor and victims of injustice and corruption.

Prophets, as I say, were judged on whether what they said came to pass and Micah made a good start – the northern kingdom of Israel was his first target, whose capital was Samaria.

Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards. I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations.' (Micah 1.6)

And it happened, early in his prophetic ministry: Sennacherib and the Assyrians descended upon Samaria and destroyed it and the northern kingdom was annihilated, never to rise again. But then he turned his gaze upon his own kingdom, Judah, in the south; Micah was from Moresheth in the Judean lowlands. They thought they were invincible, Zion was sacrosanct, God would never allow it to be destroyed. Micah preached thus:

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns they perform it... They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (Micah 2.1-2)

And they replied:

Do not preach... one should not preach of such things: disgrace will not overtake us. (Micah 2.6)

So Micah utters his prophecy of doom:

Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house [i.e. the Temple] a wooded height. (Micah 3.12)

But this did not happen, not in Micah's lifetime anyway. Much of Micah's fiery preaching would have been during the reign of King Ahaz, one of the bad guys according to the second book of Kings.

He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his ancestor David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even made his son pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. (2 Kings 16.2-3)

But seven years after the destruction of Samaria, the northern city, Ahaz died and was succeeded by his son, Hezekiah, who is one of the good guys:

He was 25 years old when he began to reign; he reigned 29 years in Jerusalem... He did what was right in the sight of the Lord... there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord had commanded Moses. The Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered. (2 Kings 18.2-7)

Under Hezekiah, Judah prospered, escaped miraculously the wrath of the Assyrians and enjoyed a period of religious and moral renewal. Micah's contemporary Isaiah becomes the prophet of the court, Archbishop of Canterbury if you like, and Micah fades into the background, but he is not forgotten – his prophecies did not become extinct but rather dormant, to explode volcanically in a future generation a hundred years later when we find another prophet standing at the gate of the Temple preaching an uncomfortable message. It is our old friend Jeremiah who we journeyed with last Lent.

Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord... Amend your ways and your doings... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' – only to go on doing these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?... Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.... because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen... therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust,.. just what I did to Shiloh. (Jeremiah 7.2-14)

The priests and the prophets arrested him and he was sentenced to death. But some of the tribal leaders intervened.

And some of the elders of the land arose and said to all the assembled people, "Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field: Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.' Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favour of the Lord, and did not the Lord change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them?" (Jeremiah 26.16-19)

And so Jeremiah was spared – at least his life was, though he suffered considerably at their hands.

630 years later another prophet sets his face towards Jerusalem and preaches against it and the abuses of power and wealth that had enraged Micah and Jeremiah generations before.

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴²saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

And then he enters the Temple, as a prophetic sign drives out the sellers and utters the words first used by Jeremiah:

“My house shall be a house of prayer”; but you have made it a den of robbers.

Our Lenten journey began with Jesus setting his face, like Isaiah in our OT reading, towards Jerusalem. We have found some of his teaching along the way challenging and uncomfortable and that’s because he did not see himself as the messiah of expectations who would enter the city to receive the acclaim of the powers and authorities. No, he saw himself not just as a messiah but as a prophet whose calling was to radically challenge those authorities and declare the judgement of God upon the city. He may have had an easy ride into Jerusalem but he knew that it wouldn’t last, that what lay before him was a prophet’s destiny – rejection, persecution, suffering, death, but first he must speak the words of judgement as Micah had done centuries before – and it was only in the light of the city’s destruction at the hands of the Romans forty years later that his prophetic words were fulfilled and he was vindicated.

Interesting that this week both the new Pope Francis and the new Archbishop Justin have begun their ministries by eschewing some of the traditional trappings of power and dignity – Francis sticking to his white robes, symbolising the holiness of his calling, rejecting the courtly Renaissance garments that speak of power and grandeur. Archbishop Justin in his prayer pilgrimage through England wore a simple black cassock rather than the imperial purple. Both men have made prayer their priority – they have been on their knees more than they have sat on thrones. This is the way of the donkey, the humble, prayerful way that is the only way they can address both the problems of their respective churches and also speak to a world with any hope of a serious hearing. It is not only the way of St Francis; it is the way of Christ, the way some of us have been rediscovering in our journey with Luke this Lent.

I invite you now to continue that journey during this Holy Week. This evening we will hear the whole Passion story in the context of music and readings that will help us to receive it. On Thursday we will share a meal in the upper room where feet are washed in mutual service, where we learn how to serve and how to receive. On Friday we stand and walk with Christ in his suffering and dying, we kneel at the foot of the cross, we weep for our sins and the sins of the world and we find again that here is the place of our healing and salvation. On Saturday night we will renew our baptism vows and share in the baptism of another so that we can enter fully into the joy of the Resurrection. Some of you will be here, others will be away with relatives or on holiday. Please wherever you are enter into this holy season and allow it once again to renew your faith, your hope and your love. This is not just for your sake but for the world Christ came to redeem.