

## Year A, Proper 4 Epiphany 4

Micah 6:1-8

1 Cor 1:18-31

Matt 5:1-12

### Blessed Are the Cheesemakers

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable to you, my Lord, my strength and my redeemer. **Amen.**

Well, what wonderful readings we are blessed with on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany. Some of my favourites. We have heard from the prophet Micah, from Paul's letter to the people of Corinth and then the Beatitudes.

I must admit to quite often inwardly smiling when I hear the Beatitudes, because I instantly recall Monty Python's Life of Brian, when the crowd mis-hear, and instead of hearing Blessed are the peacemakers, they hear, blessed are the cheesemakers...

Well, that's OK. It is easy to mis-hear what someone is saying. It is all so familiar that the words may just washes over us, rather than soaking us. And so we need to find ways to make it come at us afresh, and be open to being soaked by this passage.

What exactly is Jesus meaning when he blesses these different categories of people? It can actually sound a bit – no actually it can sound very patronising, and leave people thinking, 'It's all well and good you saying the poor are blessed, but you try and manage on a small state pension or on Universal Credit, or having to use a foodbank because your wages won't cover the cost of heating and eating, or when the DWP decides to sanction you and stop payment for some exceedingly trivial administrative break down'.

It can feel that people who identify with those categories are being told, 'you have a rubbish life now, but in heaven it won't be'. That might give a wee sense of hope for life after death, but little or no hope for this life, the life Jesus is calling us to engage with, and to be utterly present in. That can't be the message of the Beatitudes.

I want to introduce you to three times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Revd Elias Chacour<sup>i</sup>, the former Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth, and All Galilee, who identifies as a Palestinian-Arab-Christian-Israeli. In relation to the beatitudes Elias Chacour says that he reads this passage in Aramaic, and in so doing it transforms his understanding of it.

In the Greek, 'blessing' is 'Makarion'. It is quite a passive word and makes us feel like we are passive objects of blessing. However, in Aramaic, the word for blessing is 'Ashray' which derives from a verb that means something more like, 'to set yourself on the right way for the right goal; to turn around, repent; to become straight or righteous. Elias Chacour explains what he means,

*When I understand Jesus words in Aramaic, I translate like this: 'Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied. Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God.' To me (Elias) this reflects Jesus' words and teachings much more accurately. I (Elias) can hear him saying, 'Get your hands dirty to build a human society for human beings; otherwise others will torture and murder the poor, the voiceless and the powerless.' Christianity is not passive but active, energetic, alive, going beyond despair.<sup>ii</sup>*

Churches exist, I would suggest, to form us so we can follow the way of Christ, and to do this for the world's sake. Being church together is God's way of helping us be as fully open as we dare to expanding possibilities of healing and to grasp new opportunities for unity, compassion and love. God's blessing – speaking well of – initiates life, always in the freedom and respect God has for creation. As humans we find it difficult to believe in God's extravagant love for us, each and every day. Yet God continues to love us, even when we turn away from God, and is ready with a fresh invitation whenever we are ready to receive it. God is unfailing in his presence, forgiveness and love. God's justice and mercy are the two primary aspects of God, and come through in the Beatitudes strongly, just as they did in our first reading from Micah.

Micah was a prophet who really understood his role. Prophets criticised the status quo, to unsettle the people, to question the current ways of doing things and the thought-processes (or lack of them) being employed. Prophets

challenged the people to see the world through God's eyes, a very different perspective to their own, and to advocate a new way of living. Prophets certainly afflicted the comfortable and the complacent, and mostly comforted the afflicted. The Prophets other great gift was to generate a sense of excitement and hope, to help people see in their own mind's eye a new and better future, offering positive affirmation and encouragement.

I think I would make a rubbish prophet. I fear some of my sermons may afflict the comforted, challenge us to think and act differently, but leave people feeling guilty rather than painting the encouraging, effective and affirming new and better future. In my fairly frequent despair and concern about the state of the world, and frankly, the quality and integrity of some of our politicians, I may want to seek change, and point out what change looks like, but I am not sure I offer sufficient encouragement.

Anyway, let's turn to the reading from Micah - a top notch and effective prophet. Most of us can recall the last verse, verse 8.

*'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'*

We tend to blank out the preceding 7 verses, that set up this rhetorical question in verse 8. But it is critical that we understand the preceding verses because they describe how the people of Israel were behaving in their everyday lives. The people came to the Temple and acted with total piety and brought the required sacrifices. But outside of the Temple, in their everyday lives, they did not behave ethically or morally. Micah is clear that the people cannot assuage God by providing ever more elaborate sacrifices whilst at the same time not actually walking the talk, so to speak, in their daily lives.

So, what is Micah telling his listeners? He has three main points.

Micah tells the people they must do justice. The justice he refers to is social justice; issues of how well the most vulnerable are treated and how well they fare in their community.

Micah tells the people that they must love kindness; that the people must live in love equal to that which God has shown to his people Israel. In receiving God's love, the people are expected to show that love to all others.

Micah tells the people they must walk humbly with God. Micah is telling the people that in their day to day lives, as they walk alongside other people, they must treat them well, and live an ethical and moral life, and in so doing they are walking with God in their own pilgrimage through life.

We have read in the gospel that we are blessed when we take action, when we set ourselves on the right way. In Micah this was heavily underlined. Micah tells the faithful that they are called to be doing things; to be doing acts of justice, acts emanating from the extravagant love of God which we receive and are required to replicate and share with others. In leading ethically and morally correct lives we will indeed be walking humbly with our God.

Underpinning all of this, is listening to God's word to us, discerning God's will, and God's mission in our community that we are called to help deliver. One thing I am certain of, is that we need to ensure that many people get to share God's blessings, and not just the cheesemakers.

---

<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias\\_Chacour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias_Chacour)

<sup>ii</sup> Chacour, E with Jensen, M, 2001, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation*.