**#37 SG Sunday 19 December 2021**

**Advent 4**

**Micah 5: 2-5a**

**2**[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Micah+5%3A2-5a&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-22636a)] But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
    who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
    one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
    from ancient days.
**3**Therefore he shall give them up until the time
    when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
    to the people of Israel.
**4**And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
    in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
    to the ends of the earth;
**5**and he shall be the one of peace.

**Luke 1: 39-55**

**Mary Visits Elizabeth**

**39**In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40**where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41**When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42**and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43**And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44**For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. **45**And blessed is she who believed that there would be[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A+39-55&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-24931a)] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

**Mary’s Song of Praise**

**46**And Mary[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A+39-55&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-24932b)] said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
**47**    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
**48**for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
    Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
**49**for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
    and holy is his name.
**50**His mercy is for those who fear him
    from generation to generation.
**51**He has shown strength with his arm;
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
**52**He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
    and lifted up the lowly;
**53**he has filled the hungry with good things,
    and sent the rich away empty.
**54**He has helped his servant Israel,
    in remembrance of his mercy,
**55**according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
    to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

What do we know about Micah? I don’t know very much at all, I have to say, but I’m fascinated by these shadowy figures when they pop up in our lectionary, and who we actually read quite a lot of, in small parts, to the point where, almost without knowing it, their prophecy becomes part of our prophecy.

The reading from Micah so evidently points, in a Christian mindset, towards the nativity, that we take it for granted that it’s ‘about’ Jesus. Whether Micah himself was prophesying about Jesus (and he wasn’t) becomes irrelevant – we read these verses as a confirmation of what we already know.

What we know is that from Bethlehem (as in Luke 2) a saviour will come. He will rule over not just Israel but the whole world (as implied in Matthew 1: 21, and generally). He isn’t new though – he has been with us from the beginning of everything (as in John 1:2); he shall feed many people, both actually and figuratively (as in Mark 6: 41); he shall promote peace (as in Mark 23:34). So, when we read this, in our view, everything points forward to Jesus in the New Testament.

Point forwards? In a way, yes, Christmas of course being the nativity, and so a start of…something. But as John says, ‘*In the beginning* was the word…’ So there is also a sense that we are joining in half way through the story, or at least, Micah is, in our reading. We know that Micah is *contained* in the Old Testament, but John, and we, know of an even older Testament and truth.

In this way, the more we delve into scripture, the more we stand back and look at things that we read very regularly and worry them, tinker with them, think about them, discuss them, then the more prophetic we are revealed as already being. And as with all prophetic thought, the presence and love of Christ is only strengthened by that conversation.

Micah has given us plenty to go on today. Micah tells us that the word of the Lord came to him during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, and his prophecy is rooted in Samaria and Jerusalem. This places it as being written around the same time as some of the events in *first* Isaiah, in his books 1-39. So, although there is this identification with the people and the centres of power at the start of the book, by the time we get to our reading, the scene has changed.

We heard that Bethlehem – a small village, some 6 miles to the south of Jerusalem – was ‘one of the little clans;’ ’O Little Town of Bethlehem’ indeed. In Hebrew, Bet Lehem means ‘house of bread’; a rural settlement it seems, living from the land, within walking distance of the greatness and glory of Jerusalem and the temple, but also removed and private. Just the sort of place, then, where a leader who pretty often tells his followers NOT to publicise his deeds, might be happy in coming from.

So just the act of recognising Bethlehem as the true centre of the light is a prophetic one. All ‘being prophetic’ means is having the vision and will to see how things might be different. Shouldn’t a great king emerge in and be glorified at the *centre* of institutional power? And yet, He’s coming from Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

In Mary’s song, there’s a similar line of thought; she wonders about the fact that ‘The Lord has looked with favour on the *lowliness* of his servant.’ We humans are pattern-seeking animals; and so when we read Micah and Luke, no wonder that we make the links. The setting and events in Micah, and the wonderings of Mary, are wholly at-one with what we know Jesus to be.

Both readings today tell me that Christianity happens at the edges, in the conversations and the thoughts where being prophetic is least expected. I’m borrowing, as I do an awful lot, from Rachel Held Evans here, but think about it; we are all prophetic because we believe *these things* about Jesus.

Jesus, who was born as an oppressed minority in an occupied land.
Jesus who was an immigrant.

Jesus, who surrounded himself with the poor, the sick, the marginalized and the “untouchables.”

Jesus who was criticized by the religious for hanging out with sinners.

Jesus who treated women with dignity and respect.

Jesus who taught his disciples to love their enemies, to give without expecting anything in return, to overcome evil with love.

Jesus who suffered, Jesus who wept.

Jesus who **-** while hanging on a Roman cross**-** said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We look at Micah and other prophets, and we’re happy to speak OF ‘The prophets’ whilst remaining confused, a little bit scared and in some ways uninterested in calling ourselves prophets. But I would argue, in all of us just being who we are in Christ, and in following Christ how we do day in and day out, *we are already prophets*, and we all stand proudly, loved and held in Christ, within the long line of the prophets. Can we admit to ourselves that we join in that conversation, and to acknowledge this this great tradition of prophetic, generous and loving thought and action is simply part of our whole being?

So, read Micah and other prophets, and talk with them in and out of church with a sense of *family* feeling; as we sing at this time of year, Come, O Come, Emmanuel, God is with us, in the prophets and within our prophetic lives.

We are inheritors of all that has come from that ‘little clan,’ celebrated by Micah today, from the little town of bread and, I’m sure, wine, from the little town of the body and of the blood, that place of of grace and kindness, of all that is ours, given to us all by the love and prophecy of Christ.

Amen.