

Sunday 2nd February 2014 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 a.m.		4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Epiphany 4 – Year A The Presentation - Candlemas
Micah 6:1-8	Ps 15	1 Cor 1:18-31
		Matthew 5:1-12
CALLED TO BE		

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. There he sat down, and when his disciples had gathered round him, he began to address them.” (Mt 5:1f.)

Epiphany

We are in the season of Epiphany – the Sundays between Epiphany and the start of Lent. The word “Epiphany” is a Greek word which means “manifestation” – showing forth, presenting. Jesus Christ is presented to the world as its true Light. The Epiphany season began just after Christmas on the Feast of the Epiphany, with the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus, and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; the season will end on the Sunday before Lent, with the story of the transfiguration. The Epiphany and the Transfiguration are like those great crashes of thunder and lightning we sometimes experience here in Grahamstown: they tell of glory, wonder, worship, adoration. They are signs, pictures, which tell us something of who Jesus is, who this child is, who was born and lived among us; who is the God we worship and who has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel themes for these Sundays during the Epiphany season tell their own story. They are like a golden thread of light and life to keep us alive and hopeful through the darkness. We began a few weeks ago with the baptism of Jesus, pointing us back to our own baptism, when we become sons and daughters of God, God’s beloved children. Then we had the call of those first disciples, and our call also to be disciples of Jesus. Then, from today, we have four Sundays which focus on the Sermon on the Mount – the new life in Christ into which we are baptised, the way we are called to live as children of God. Finally, on the Sunday before Lent, the Transfiguration.

Micah

Our readings today are in many ways a summary of Christian ethics and teaching – how we are to live; but they point us beyond simply a set of rules or commandments: we are given a picture of the people we are called to be.

From the prophet Micah:

“The Lord has told you mortals what is good, and what it is that the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk humbly with your God.” (6:8) – REB.

“... to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (NAB).

The Message: “Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.”

True religion, Micah - together with the other Old Testament prophets - is saying, “is not the offering of empty sacrifices, but rather the living of a moral life, the practice of justice in society, and a genuine reverence for God.”¹

It reminds me of the story of the rabbi who was asked if he could recite the entire Law, the Torah, while standing on one leg. He replied, “That’s easy. Love God, love your neighbour as yourself. The rest is just commentary.”

The prophet Micah attacked the corruption that was destroying Israelite society – the greed of the rich and powerful, the dishonesty of the merchants, the worship of pagan gods – and the way in which the powerless in society were exploited and oppressed.

¹ *The African Bible* 1999, 1579

What are the values we hold most dear? What sort of ethical leadership do we expect from big business, from government? How should companies treat or pay their workers? What is our response when we read of corruption, or theft, or mismanagement, or the waste of state resources, or Nkandlagate?

Micah's words are just as relevant for us in South Africa and in Grahamstown today. When Makana municipality receives a qualified audit, when state officials enrich themselves through tenders, when Madiba funeral transport funds are channelled elsewhere, when there is sloppy financial management in an organisation, it is the weak and poor who ultimately suffer and pay the price. Corruption, greed and general dishonesty are like a cancer in our society.

The Beatitudes

The other summary we heard was our Gospel reading, the Beatitudes – themselves a summary of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of the five great blocks of teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus taught and healed, he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom in word and deed.

We can see a parallel between Moses and Jesus. Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Law, the Ten Commandments. Jesus also goes up the mountain (Mt 5:1) and it is there that he sits down and teaches his disciples.

But then, instead of giving the disciples a new set of commandments, he gives them, and us, a new way of living. The Beatitudes – a description of those who are blessed – is not another list or burden of rules for us to obey. Instead, the Beatitudes go deeper. They speak to our hearts. They give us a picture of the people we are called to be.

Jesus is often called the new Moses. Moses went up the mountain, Mt Sinai, and brought down the Law, the Ten Commandments, which gave shape to the people of Israel. Jesus went up the mountain,

gathered his disciples around him, and taught them the new Law, the new way of living.

There are 10 Commandments; there are 9 Beatitudes; we know the Commandments well; we say them regularly during Lent; they have shaped our society and our civil law. Most of us probably observe the 10 Commandments most of the time. But what about the Beatitudes?

A recent study of leadership identified four key steps that need to be followed, for effective leadership to take place, particularly in the life of the church, but equally in civil society – and here I define a leader as someone with any kind of influence:

- 1) the budding leader needs a sound ‘theology of leadership’ and a range of ‘emotional intelligence [EQ] capacities’;
- 2) the skills of social analysis, to understand the context in which the leader is working;
- 3) the leader needs to be able to build and hold vision in the community;
- 4) the leader must know how to do strategic planning.²

But alongside these skills, a key component, a key competency, for any leader, the study found, is

“the daily practice of a deep spiritual life that builds and sustains the development of character”.

In other words, a key and vital part of any leader is not just the set of skills we might have; a vital part of any leader, anyone with influence, is the kind of person we are.

The Beatitudes are not so much a list of what we need to do, but a description of the people we are called to be.

² Chris Ahrends, *Four-Steps Leadership Model*, October 2013 Leadership Consultation, Johannesburg.

The Beatitudes speak to our places of pain; they speak to our sorrows, our longing, our emptiness, our hunger and sadness, our desolation; and they speak to the qualities, the attitudes, that break down barriers and that make a difference, that help to transform and renew.

The Beatitudes speak to those of us who know what it is to be in need: to be vulnerable, to experience disappointment and sadness and sorrow and loss and hurt; to know what it is to fail, even to weep – in other words, to be poor in spirit. It is good if we are not always the glamorous, successful people for whom nothing ever seems to go wrong. Because it is the pain and heartache and loss and deep need that catapults us into the arms of God, there to find consolation and strength and comfort.

We are called to be gentle, to be merciful, to be peacemakers, to be pure in heart, to hunger and thirst for what is right, and to be prepared to be persecuted for it all. These qualities are the character of Christ. These are the marks of the Christian disciples. These are the kind of people that we long to have as our leaders, as our companions, as our fellow pilgrims. People of the beatitudes.

So we are to do and to be: to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God; and to be people who have the qualities needed to bring change and transformation, because we ourselves have been transformed.

The Beatitudes are a call to a very deep conversion of heart and life. They speak to our broken-ness, to our failure, to our deepest cries; they speak to our hopes for a better world, our longings for happy communities, our prayers for peace.

CONCLUSION

May we be transformed into the people that God calls us to be.