

# THE WORLD AS GIFT

**St. Lawrence, Winchester**

**11<sup>th</sup> May 2011**

## Loving Mercy

The book of Micah the 8<sup>th</sup> Century prophet is not exactly what we might think of as a 'laugh a minute'. Micah of Moresheth could well be termed in today's language as a "grumpy old man", and with justification.

The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (symbolised by Samaria and Jerusalem) are under judgement for their lack of faithfulness to Yahweh and their leaders are being called to account for the brokenness of the community.

The land, which God gives for the benefit of all, is being treated as a commodity and the poor are being made land-less and driven towards death, as the rich become care-less and unjust.

The leaders are accused of feathering their own nests and their concern is for their own wealth and pleasure, not the common good. They seek violent solutions and short-term ill-gotten gains, forgetting that the wealth of all the Earth is intended for the whole of life, not just for the benefit of a select few.

The social consequences of denying the roots of God's righteousness or justice are clear to see: distrust, hunger, deceit, corruption, lack of confidence, poverty, fragmentation. And all this has come about because of idolatry - the worship of that which is temporal and converting it into something eternal. Jon Sobrino, the liberation theologian, says that idolatry happens when our possessions possess us! For instance, when we get our priorities wrong and we focus on the short-term and immediate, not the long-term and the whole picture.

So, we might ask the question what are our own current cultural priorities? What possesses us now and have we got our options right?

Celia last week will have been addressing what is going on in the world? What are the challenges we face not just as Christians, but as a human species? To the top of my such list would be: Global Warming caused by anthropogenic Climate Change; Water Crises as the planet's supply of fresh water is drastically depleted due to pollution, over-use, poor

management and rising sea temperatures; Growing inequalities between rich and poor in a growing population heading towards 7 billion later this summer; Resource depletion – peak oil, peak uranium, peak water, as finite resources are consumed, including the loss of biodiversity and a rapid rate of species extinction.

I might also add long-term health problems prompted by too little food in some places and too much in others; Illnesses provoked by lifestyles of convenience and consumption – a word which has previously been long associated with dis-ease and death!

I could go on and you will have your own lists.

These are, I suggest, some of the consequences in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in a society which has also lost its way, as Israel had in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century before the Common Era.

But let us return to the text which inspires these lectures.....

Micah does not leave things in a slough of total despair. Yahweh may be an angry deity but does not remain so forever. Instead God delights to show mercy – to accept a penitent leadership and to return to being a generous and merciful Lord, as he pledged to Jacob and Abraham and the ancestors generations before.

The answer to going wrong is not to be found so much in ritual, but in right behaviour. Practice cannot be divorced from personality, culture cannot be separated from character. And what does Yahweh see as correct but “*acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God*”.

Fundamentally, Micah calls for a change of attitude and a change of lifestyle and at its heart is the requirement to be mercy-full.

Three different words translate as ‘mercy’ from their Hebrew original.

Firstly, Rahamim is the plural ‘wombs’ and refer to mercy expressed in sources of new birth and nurture. One might say that mercy is to be felt from the conception of life and is engendered primarily by women as mothers.

The words Hen or Hanan imply mercy being a gift or favour; an unconditional act of loving.

The word used in Micah 6 is that most commonly employed for mercy, and that is Chesed. This is a kind love which is covenanted by God to his peoples and the Earth, and is, for example, reflected in the tripartite covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 when God builds a living partnership between the divine, the human and the planet. Life is a created, interconnected web which is held together by mutual and enduring relationships. Or to use slightly different language, it is the energy of grace and love which sustains life as we know it. Without mercy, without loving kindness, we would not be here.

In the words of Sister Julia Upton (in the New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality), “taken together, these three roots give us an understanding of God’s mercy in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scripture). It is best demonstrated by Hosea and Jeremiah, who use the analogy of marriage between Yahweh and Israel, showing us that mercy is the fruit of the Covenant, forgiving as well as caring and nurturing”

For Jesus in the Gospels, mercy is an everyday reality. It is the source of motivation for relating to our neighbour – both human and non-human. It is the source of thankfulness for the beauty of the earth and our learning to respect and share its resources, quoting from the prayer of this series.

It is through mercy or kind loving that Jesus confronted the evil of his time. He encountered those who lived on the edge of society, and he suffered alongside the pain and vulnerability of others. It is by obligation in Christian discipleship that we are called to do the same in our own contexts today.

So how does this relate to some of the big environmental and ecological issues of our day?

We need to take the wisdom of Micah’s message and apply it to where we now are. Chris Brice and Ian Christie will be picking up the issues of humility and justice more in the coming weeks, but I would share a few thoughts in principle and practice on what I call “merciful living” in the contemporary world.

I would share with you three areas of action, with examples from my own experience: caring about the future; challenging creation injustice; and engendering hope and possibility.

My own view is that much, though not all, of our modern capitalist society has become detached from its roots and is therefore in danger of losing its soul. We are at risk of replacing fulfilment with pleasure, faith with certainty and value with price. We therefore live and act more superficially and this can deny our deeper need for wholeness.

We are encouraged to think that in a '*society of strangers*' we are all individuals who should seek personal happiness, and in so doing we have de-politicised the relationships which hold people together and create community.

The psychologist Wilhelm Reich identified three layers to human personality and interaction. On the surface we are nice, polite and jolly people who get along fine. But beneath, there is a more abrasive and competitive person who seeks to relate to others only in a submission – domination mode (top-dog/under-dog, with a need for constant blame and scapegoating). This is a layer with a tendency to be without mercy and with merciless intentions. It is the darker side of our nature.

But thirdly, Reich said, there is another fundamental layer which is deeply loving, caring and merciful. It is selfless, compassionate, warm and gently encompassing of others. This is the self which can only blossom in relationships of common cooperation, mutuality and support.

It seems to me that Reich's analysis has much to say at a time when we do not interact deeply enough to nurture the communities of place, interest and history which are fundamental to stronger and more sustainable lifestyles. Surely this is so necessary in the face of the challenges we face across the globe.

But I digress! Let me return to my three calls to action:

### **Caring about the Future**

We know that southern countries (the so-called developing world) are already reeling from the effects of climate change: droughts, extreme weather events, mass migrations, rising sea levels, loss of glacial melt water feeding into river systems, and so on.

Studies have also pointed out that in the UK it will be those who are most vulnerable who will suffer most with increasing ecological

breakdown. This could be those affected by flooding across marginal land; or older people whose health is weakened by warmer temperatures; or those who cannot afford heating bills; or others whose mental health is at risk by fear or insecurity.

It may seem strange to link mental health and climate, but some psychologists talk in terms of the need for Environmental Therapy and 'Planetary Hospice Workers'. For in reality much of the Earth and its residents are experiencing death and dying as a result of climatic chaos.

This is strong stuff as we become aware of a massive loss of life. Some of us, at least, face extinction of life as we know and love it, and that is an extremely painful realisation. Some communities, some cultures, some countries will not survive the pressures we are inflicting on the planet's ecology.

When three symbols of climate change – a dried maize, a broken coral and an exposed glacial rock – were made part of the COP15 liturgy at Copenhagen Cathedral in 2009, emotions ran high. These were compelling signs of profound disturbance.

In addition, we ignore the legacy of danger we are passing on to our progeny. There is much wisdom in asking ourselves what good will our actions leave for our children's children? Does anything else matter as much? As Schumacher once said, "*we shall be judged by future generations not by our technological advances, but by how much nature we leave intact for our descendants*".

This calls us to draw deeply on our understanding of God's grace and mercy to be able to support each other in the changes ahead. Traditionally, works of mercy have been corporal and spiritual – supporting the poor, comforting the bereaved, standing alongside those who are fear-full and broken.

Caring for the future may well push us to re-assess these roles, recalling that those without mercy are frequently condemned – whether a victim or a rescuer. Redemption and healing are fruits of mercy, and this is true of environmental crises as well as social or spiritual ones.

It is not at all easy because we need to re-assess our own attitudes and activities. We need to question ourselves and campaign against our own

greed. To forsake ourselves now for the sake of others in the future is hugely challenging.

***One example of Christians thinking about the future in my work has been Devon Churches Green Action (DCGA).***

*Formed in 1986 as the Devon Christian Ecology Group, the renamed Devon Churches Green Action has been a positive example in encouraging local Christians to care about and for the non-human world, as well as for our human relationships with the Earth.*

*Some of their past and current activities include:*

- *regular articles sent to over 100 church magazine editors*
- *annual display and service at Exeter Cathedral*
- *producing and providing prayer cards, orders of service (liturgies) and other resources for creation-focused worship*
- *circulating ideas and audits to encourage personal and community lifestyle changes*
- *organising and promoting lectures, presentations and conferences on green issues*
- *started a new initiative called Food for Thought, now re-launched as the Devon Food Group*

**Challenging Creation Injustice**

If we can think again at our own lives and the ways we organise our priorities we may open our eyes more widely to the effects we have on others.

There is no doubt that already those who are most affected by Climate Change are those contributing least to its causes. The same is true of some other ecological issues.

I was very privileged to have been present at the Klima Forum at the Copenhagen COP15 Summit in December 2009. There were many participants from the most vulnerable communities and countries on the planet – Bangladeshis, Laplanders, East Africans, people from the Andes, Pacific Islanders, and Inuit, amongst others. Their position was summed up in the words of a women poet from Kenya: *“We do not want GM food, or transfer technology, or nuclear power. We want to be able to*

*continue living in our own vibrant communities as we have done for thousands of years. But the rich world is preventing us from living as we will”.*

My own Diocese of Exeter is linked with the church in Melanesia, where the government is already drawing up plans for the evacuation of certain islands because of rising ocean levels. Peoples and places are even now under threat of extinction because of Global Warming. This is current reality as well as future fear.

Even now there are still a few vociferous organisations and individuals who deny that human-induced Climate Change is happening. However, I would suggest that the overwhelming scientific evidence (IPCC) points to the opposite – it is not only taking place but is speeding up and its consequences are likely to be catastrophic. Climate justice demands that denial is no longer a political option. Climate refugees are already increasing in number and extent. So the key Christian response, exemplified by the Aid agencies such as CAFOD, Christian Aid and TEARfund, is to campaign on behalf of the vulnerable and express mercy in places of power, when they are not able to do so themselves.

Justice results from merciful action and merciful action needs to include challenging the powers that be about Global Warming...

***One example of this for me has been the Devon Christian Climate Change Coalition (DCCCC).***

*Initiated in 2007 and bringing together the Church Aid agencies and other partners (DCGA, Global Centre), this ad hoc group has focussed on campaigning with and for the victims of climate change.*

*In 2008 it organised an event called ‘Hope Rising’ at Exeter Cathedral with speakers Ann Pettifor, Daleep Mukarji, Ben Bradshaw, George Geber. Resulting from this was the signing of a massive banner delivered to the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown at 10 Downing Street. Our main aim was to push raising the carbon emission reduction targets to 80% by 2050 (which we achieved!).*

*In 2009 it organised a train from Plymouth packed with people for the national ‘Blue Wave’ march in London, prior to the Copenhagen Summit. Vigils were held too at local churches and cathedrals, all demonstrating a positive, ecumenical expression of pressing for climate justice.*

## **Engendering Hope and Possibility**

It is clear that part of the anguish expressed by Micah about what was going on in his time, was felt because he knew life could and should be better. Injustice and exploitation are unacceptable, because there are other choices and possibilities.

God has promised that if people review their priorities and return to the ways he has set down (through the Law/Torah), he will bring about a new and restored world. Nations will settle their disputes, violence will be rejected and peace will break out. Then, there will be sustainability and security.

In other words, there is and always will be hope. Compassion and love will be rediscovered; the spears of environmental desecration will be reshaped into the pruning hooks of sustainable living. Care-less-ness is transformed into kind-heartedness; competitiveness into sharing. All will find rest and live in peace.

Hope is the blossom of the plant Mercy. If we are deeply motivated by love then there will always be alternatives. Other ways will be possible and the dilemmas of our era can be overcome.

The Greek word for mercy is 'eleos' and we are perhaps familiar with this in our worshipful use of Kyrie Eleison – Lord, have mercy. God is merciful to us; we are merciful to others; others are merciful to their neighbours and their environment; we are all more merciful in our respect for the Earth.

Mercy is a tool in breaking and reversing spirals of decline, violence and destruction. We know this from other pastoral contexts – the abuse of children, the fractures of marriage, the promotion of fear or hatred. Mercy imbues a different attitude and opens the door to the possibility of change, and thus of outcomes that are more hope-full.

For ecological re-balance, it is necessary to turn apathy and indifference, cynicism or disempowerment on their heads. We need to acknowledge the damage we are doing and then engage in activities to push the trends in an opposite direction.

In order to grow or progress, we need two things: a realistic appraisal of our current situation and an inspiring vision of where we want to reach. The tension between these two then energises us to move forward and achieve our aspiration, albeit not necessarily by a direct or straightforward route.

***Shrinking the Footprint, the Church of England's climate campaign, is a good example of saying that another way is possible and more hopeful.***

*The Exeter Diocesan Synod has given a very strong mandate through StF to cutting its carbon footprint by 42% by 2020 (in line with an 80% reduction by 2050). A small team of staff and volunteers (now also working with other churches) is seeking to make progress in five areas of ministry in Devon: church buildings and land; procurement and supplies; transport and travel; shared lifestyle; worship and theology.*

*The results so far include the following headlines:*

- *developing a 10 year STF Strategy*
- *carrying out energy studies of 50 churches and other buildings*
- *a rolling programme to insulate all clergy housing (+ other energy saving measures)*
- *developing a solar PV project for church roofs (with funding)*
- *over 100 churches switching to green electricity and gas*
- *introducing a staff travel plan, ecodriving and promoting teleconferencing*
- *preparing a ministry training module on Creation and Climate*
- *exploring other renewable energy possibilities (biomass, wind, ground/air source heating)*

My conclusion in this lecture is to suggest we need radically to assess where we are now, including a recognition of our past sins and shortcomings. Then we need to bravely state where we want to go as a church, as a society, as a species. Life does not have to be as it is. Part of building God's reign is to accept things as they are but not to leave them that way.

The world is always God's gift and it is the place of God's creativity and redemption – that is why it is holy and to be treated with care and respect. The mercy or loving kindness of God incarnates us to live more wholly/holy. It calls us always to complete the divine purpose of

togetherness for all life. It offers to us a deep reason to care for the future, to challenge injustice and to engender hope.

So may we be forgiven for our misuse of God's bounty, prompted to amend our actions, that we may do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our Creator and our Redeemer.

Thank you – or as the French say – Merci!

© Martyn Goss  
Council for Church and Society, Exeter