

## The Message of Micah

### Then & Now

*“God sometimes blesses a poor exegesis of a bad translation of a doubtful reading of an obscure verse of a minor prophet.”*

*Thomas Merton*

Despite Merton’s observation I will do my best to avoid shoddy exegesis. Micah’s message is too important for that. Even though these words were uttered about 2,700 years ago they have enormous relevance for us today, even though our context is dramatically different. Unlike the OT people of God, the NT people of God have:

- no geographical identity;
- no national or cultural identity;
- no theocratic state to which we belong.

But just like the OT people of God we:

- have profound experience of the generosity and grace of God;
- are called to serve God, and worship God alone (they were urged not to bow down to Baal, we are urged not to bow down to Mammon);
- are called to be a tangible witness to the character of a holy God. In other words the values and priorities that shape our lives are to reflect God’s priorities and values.

Micah has much to teach us regarding these values and priorities. Indeed, for those who are part of the wealthy wing of the global church at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Micah’s words have an immediate relevance. As a result they are provocative and profoundly challenging. In our brief examine Micah’s description of the grievous condition of God’s people it will be important for us to reflect on our own church contexts. Similarly, as we consider the prophet’s exhortation to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God,” it is essential that we carefully evaluate our church programmes and priorities in its light.

We will begin our exploration of Micah by reading Micah 6.1-8. Because we are far removed in time and culture from the prophet it is very easy for us to read these words in Micah and not realise that he is using the specialist legal language of the courts of the day. But his original audience would have understood this immediately. They were being put on trial, and the language he uses could not be more intimidating.

*“Mountains, hear God’s case; listen, jury Earth, for I am bringing charges against my people. I am building a case against Israel.”* Micah 6.1-2 (Peterson translation)

God is the prosecutor. On trial are the leaders, the priests, and the prophets of God’s people. The charges God is laying against them could not have been more serious, as we will see later. He was accusing them of committing terrible injustices against the weak and powerless, something they could not do without deliberately ignoring several of God’s specific instructions laid down in unambiguous detail in the Old Testament Law.

Nor could they do this without making a mockery of their religion, without making a mockery of God himself. As a result, their worship had become deeply offensive to the one who was supposed to be the object of that worship. But more on this later.

It is so important for us to try and appreciate how profoundly alarming Micah's words would have been to many in his first audience. He was challenging their dearest held convictions about their relationship with God, and their role and place in God's dealings with humanity.

The leaders, priests and prophets would have been deeply agitated by Micah's words. I imagine that the great majority of them would have reacted defensively and angrily. They could well have thought to themselves:

*"Who does Micah think he is? What does he know about God, and faith, and worship? He's nothing but a jumped-up, self-appointed prophet? A trouble maker. We are YHWH's elected people, specially chosen by him, nothing can change that."*

Perhaps a handful of the leaders responded with appropriate humility, willing to carefully and prayerfully consider the accusations.

But what about the poor, the exploited, the neglected, the outcasts? What about them? How might they have responded to these words of Micah had they been among the audience? For them his words were filled with promise and hope, because they reveal a God who cares deeply about the painful circumstances of their lives, and who insists that his people respond urgently to this with justice and compassion.

What was the nature of God's accusations against those who were charged with the responsibility of leading his people. What were their crimes? What were they being charged with?

1. They were prostituting their vocation – their prophecies, preaching and leadership were shaped by a desire for comfort and commercial gain.
2. They were committing acts of gross violence against the poor, and seizing their assets.
3. They were perverting a legal system designed to protect the weak, and converting it into an instrument of oppression and exploitation.

### **The First Charge: A prostituted message.**

Read Micah 2.6; 3.5; 3.9-11

The priests, preachers and prophets of Micah's time had degenerated into little more than PR merchants for the rich and powerful. Moreover, they sought to sideline and silence those that were prepared to boldly speak the word of the Lord. They spoke what the leaders wanted to hear, motivated by their own desire for commercial gain.

Jeremiah identified the same tragic problem: "for from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated to wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer. 6.13-14)

To quote Jeremiah again, the priests and prophets had made the word of God "an object of scorn" (6.10). They were more interested in profit than the truth, more interested in personal profit than human rights, more interested in self-advancement than justice. As a consequence, they re-shaped their religion so that it justified a corrupt status quo rather than challenge it.

Is today's church tarnished by equally unscrupulous, economically ambitious and false preachers and teachers? Occasionally such people are exposed, much to the delight of secular society and the dismay of the church. Apart from this, however, there is enormous pressure on the preachers and pastors in affluent churches today. It is a pressure not to make a big deal out of the Bible's teaching on poverty, justice and compassion. As a consequence the church's witness in these areas is sadly compromised.

I believe there is also a subtle but considerable pressure to teach and preach a privatised religion, with considerable emphasis upon personal salvation and little emphasis on discipleship and the nurturing of Christian character that moves beyond a narrow personal ethic into the broader Biblical dimensions of justice and a Biblical economy. There is also enormous pressure to invest heavily in the choreography of worship, in order to satisfy the felt needs of congregations, and under these circumstances there is a danger that style can become more important than substance.

The fact is faith and religious practice, devoid of a passionate commitment to justice and mercy, does not thrill God. It saddens and angers him!  
Consider the words of a contemporary of Micah, the prophet Amos<sup>1</sup>:

*“Woe to you who turn justice to vinegar and stomp righteousness into the mud.  
Do you realise where you are? You're in a cosmos star flung with constellations by God.*

*A world God wakes up each morning and puts to bed each night.  
God dips water from the ocean and gives the land a drink.  
God, God-revealed does all this.” (5.7-9)*

*“Justice is a lost cause. Evil is epidemic.  
Decent people throw up their hands.  
Protest and rebuke are useless, a waste of breath.  
Seek good and nor evil – and live.” (5.13-14)*

*“I can't stand your religious meetings.  
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.  
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,  
Your pretentious slogans and goals.  
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making.  
I've had all that I can take of your noisy ego-music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?  
Do you know what I want?  
I want justice – oceans of it.  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want. (5.21-24)*

Authentic worship is about pursuing that which pleases God, not that which makes us feel good. This means that a commitment to justice and mercy must be at the centre of our worship. It is a fundamental requirement.

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<sup>1</sup> From the Peterson translation

## The Second Charge: Gross Violence Against the Poor

Micah 2.1-2 describes very clearly the evil intent of the oppressors. There was nothing incidental or accidental about the injustices they were perpetrating. They were premeditated. Even as they lay in bed they were dreaming up schemes of oppression and exploitation! They first covet, and then steal the fields that do not belong to them.

Micah 3.2-3 draws upon extremely dramatic language to describe the oppression of the poor. The Prophet accuses the rulers of tearing the skin off their people, chopping up their flesh, and devouring it. It's a terrible metaphor, but the severity of the language reflects God's anguish and horror at the destruction of the hopes and lives of many innocent people.

King Ahab's atrocity against Naboth (1 Kings 21) is a dramatic example of such oppression. Failing to persuade Naboth to sell his vineyard, he slipped into a pit of sullen resentment. Seeing this, his wife Jezebel used malleable officials to corrupt the judicial system, and have Naboth killed.

Despite all his wealth, Ahab wanted more. Greed can never be satisfied. Greed combined with power was a death sentence for Naboth - an extreme example of the kind of injustice Micah was addressing.

Consider Job 24:1-11. This provides a graphic description of the processes which strip the poor of their rightful dues and inflict upon them terrible suffering. Read it now, preferably in the RSV or NRSC translation. Note its description of the methodology of oppression. Note:

- the stealing of vital assets from the weak: their land and livestock (v2); the animals necessary for cultivation and transport of produce (v3);
- the forcing of the poor to the margins where they have no option but to exploit ecologically fragile land (v4,5);
- the exploitation of the children of the poor (v9);
- and, finally, the withholding of adequate wages from those who now have no choice but to hire themselves out as labourers to rich landholders - despite their hard work they remain hungry and thirsty (v 10,11).

Tragically, this analysis, written about 2,500 years ago, remains an accurate description of what continues to happen in countless situations around the world.

Read this account written by Ross Pilkington, a New Zealander who worked in the Philippines with Servants to the Urban Poor. He describes a very faith- confronting encounter with a friend and neighbour.

*"I could see Alex was dejected. Normally he was smiling and talkative when he came to the pump in our yard to fill his black cooking tin. We have lived in this slum community in the hills behind Manila for 18 months now and early each morning before he began his day's work Alex would come to wash himself and get the household water for Lorna and their little son Ton Ton.*

*Alex was a "junk man". Every day he pushed his heavy, lumbering cart door to door, buying, scavenging anything of value. He would push the fully laden cart 15km over*

*hilly terrain to the depot to deliver his valuable cargo, arriving home after dark, hungry and exhausted.*

*Alex had become my best friend. When I was sick with dengue fever he had come and prayed for me, out loud, passionately for 15 minutes, in his native Tagalog, even though he knew I hardly understood a word. Often he brought bananas or sweet rice to thank us for some small kindness given. In the early days, when Ton Ton arrived, we lent them about 500 pesos (about \$A35) to extend their 3m x 4m shack. They made us Ton Ton's godparents, but never quite managed to repay that loan. Once he took us to the fiesta in his home village where his father had a tiny coffee plantation on the side of a mountain, and they feasted us like kings – no doubt living for weeks on starvation rations as a result.*

*But this day he looked so sad and dejected. I asked him, 'Alex, my friend, you look so unhappy today. What's the matter?'*

*His skinny arms stopped pumping, he straightened, turned his normally dancing eyes fully upon me, and quaking with emotion cried out, "Pastor Ross, why am I so poor? I love God with all my heart, I work so hard sometimes I think I will die. I am faithful to my wife and child. You tell me, why am I so poor?"*

You tell me, why am I so poor? It is precisely in response to this kind of pain that the writer of Job concludes in 24.12: *"People are dying right and left, groaning in torment. The wretched cry out for help and God does nothing, acts like nothing's wrong!"* (Peterson)

The Bible does not disdainfully dismiss such a conclusion. Instead it empathises with the pain and despair of the poor, and recognises it as a challenge to faith<sup>2</sup>. But more than that, far more than that, it urges us to believe in a God of justice and immeasurable compassion, and then to live and act faithfully in the light of this conviction. This conviction lies at the heart of Micah, as it does in so much of the Scripture.

### **Charge 3: Corruption of the Justice System**

Read again Micah's words in 3: 9-11

*"Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgement for a bribe." (9-11, NRSV)*

Amos, a near contemporary of Micah, describes these corrupt activities in more detail. In chapter 5.10 we read, *"They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth."*<sup>3</sup> Instead of doing the right thing, according to the law, we are told in Amos 5.11-12 that they *"trample on the poor", "afflict the righteous", "take a bribe", and, "push aside the needy."*

God commands them through his prophet to cease such oppression and exploitation, and *"Seek good and not evil, that you may live...hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate."* (5.14-15)

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Psalm 10.

<sup>3</sup> The 'gate' is a reference to the fortified building set in the walls of Israel's towns and cities in which the courts met.

Returning to Micah chapter 6 we can see God speaking clearly through his true prophet, one with the courage to speak plainly to the rulers, priests, preachers and prophets regarding their evil actions. God now spells out in the simplest and clearest language exactly what his requirements of them are.

But first, as we can see in 6.3-5 he reminds them of all that he has done for them in the past. He reminds them of a history of grace and love. "I brought you out of Egypt. I rescued you from slavery." Micah is reminding us of the fundamental and indispensable motivation for serving God, our experience of his love, and the gratitude that flows out of it.

But the response of those being accused by Micah make an appalling response, one that not only betrays their foolish arrogance and misplaced pride, but also their abject failure to understand the true nature of authentic worship. Despite the severity of God's accusations, all they could do was speak in terms of their sterile religious practices, and their lips dripped with sarcasm:

"Come on God, what do you want from us? What's going to please you? Shall we sacrifice thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? How about if we sacrificed our first born child, the very fruit of our body? Would that be good enough for you?" (loose translation)

And the prophet responds:

"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?" 6.8

### **Humility, Kindness & Justice**

Very significantly, Jesus took hold of the words in Micah's triple challenge and made them his own as he attacked the religious leaders of his day. In so doing he made it absolutely crystal clear that doing justice, living mercifully, and walking humbly with God is part of our job description as followers of Christ. It's a requirement.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe your dill, mint and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel." (Mat.23.23 NRSV)

It is critically important that we recognise, and hold on to, that the three dimensions in these exhortations of Micah and Jesus are interconnected, interdependent and indispensable, like the 3 legs of a 3-legged stool.

Before examining each of the 3 legs it's helpful remember again that the fundamental and indispensable motivation for serving God is our experience of his love. God's grace is the environment in which discipleship is possible. We need to keep remembering and emphasising this because it is an antidote to the legalism that so easily creeps in and perverts our faith. The critical connection between grace and obedience that shapes our discipleship is expressed beautifully in 1 John 3.16.

*"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help."* (NRSV)

These words of John capture the heartbeat of both Old Testament and New Testament ethics. We love because he first loved us.

### **Walk Humbly with your God**

Micah 6.6-7 show us that Micah was dealing with a bunch of religious leaders who were stuffed full to the brim with their own sense of importance. They were very like many of the scribes and Pharisees encountered by Jesus. Such people:

- are incapable of hearing the word of God when it comes to them;
- fail to be moved by the needs of others, and consider their own wants far more important;
- struggle to see the image of God in the person living on the streets.

Humility is the only appropriate state of heart and mind when we encounter God, and without it we cannot know intimacy with the creator. Jesus said “blessed are the poor in spirit”. In other words, “blessed are those who know their need of God, and who, even in the most desperate of circumstances, put their trust in him.”

This message is taken up in the Psalms:

*“You deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down.”* Ps.18.27

*“He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.”* Ps. 25.9

Nowhere is this message of the blessing of the humble, and the reversal of fortunes for the proud and powerful, more graphically given than in Mary’s gloriously prophetic utterance, otherwise known as the Magnificat (see Luke 1.46-55). Mary expresses profound joy at her pregnancy and in her knowledge of what God was setting in motion through the birth of Christ. It is a wonderful vision of transformation, a process which would begin with the birth of her son.

Jesus’ disciples are invited to participate in this wonderfully subversive process of transformation, and we do so knowing that at some point in the future God will complete the process.

In a recent article Philip Yancey wrote about a conference he attended which had been organised by 45 Christian groups from 30 countries involved in ministry to prostitutes<sup>4</sup>. He was deeply affected by the testimonies of many of these women who spoke of the pain and hardship of their lives, and the joys of liberation in Christ. He finished with a quote from C.S. Lewis:

Lewis had been puzzling over Jesus’ provocative statement, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” and he concluded: *“Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God. The proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are in that danger.”*

In his very interesting book “The Next Christendom”, Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, explores the massive changes that have taken place in Christian demography over the last century, and then attempts a look into the future. At the end of the book he offers the following fascinating observation:

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, Christianity Today, January 2005, p80

*“Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor and persecuted while it atrophies among the rich and secure...The distribution of modern Christians might well show that the (Christian) religion does succeed best when it takes very seriously the profound pessimism about the secular world that characterises the New Testament. If it is not exactly a faith based on the experiences of poverty and persecution, then at least it regards these things as normal and expected elements of life. That view is not derived from complex theological reasoning, but is rather a lesson drawn from lived experience. Christianity can certainly succeed in other settings, even among peace and prosperity, but perhaps it does become harder, as hard as passing through the eye of a needle.”<sup>5</sup>*

In July 2005, during a visit to Nepal, I had lunch with a rural Christian family, and heard what to me was a remarkable story, yet it is one repeated over and over in this very poor country. In the context of substantial hostility these Christians have consistently demonstrated a deep faith, and their good works and character are winning them back the support and respect of the wider community. Only a few days earlier I had been reading 1 Peter, and something of what he wrote was very pertinent to the experience of the Nepali Christian family: ‘conduct yourselves honourably among the gentiles, so that, even though they malign you as evil doers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.’<sup>6</sup>

Here is there story.

Several years ago Kanchi Tamang suffered from a chronic and debilitating illness. It was never diagnosed, but though she and her husband spent far more money than they could afford on various treatments and medicines, she received no relief from the pain. Whatever it was, injury or disease, she was unable to stand straight, and endured much pain. Eventually a Christian couple from another village in the area heard of her plight, visited her, and asked if they could pray for her, that she might receive healing. The Christian couple prayed several times for Kanchi, and over a period of a week or so she experienced a full healing. At that point she became a secret Christian. While her husband knew she had been healed as a result of the prayers, he did not know that in her heart she had decided to become a Christian. It was 2-3 years later, when a grandson became very ill, that Kanchi confessed her new faith to her husband, explaining to him that she had kept it secret because she did not expect him to approve. He responded by saying that they should both pray for their grandson’s healing, and “if God heals, then we will all believe.” The family then experienced their second miracle.

Kanchi’s son Jawan married his wife Anju in a Buddhist ceremony in the days before his parents converted to Christianity. When he too became a Christian Anju was not at all comfortable. She would leave the room, and sometimes the house, whenever he started to read Bible. Then she too was healed during a time of serious illness, and as a direct result became one of this tiny group of Christian disciples.

When Share & Care<sup>7</sup> established a women’s group in the community in 2002 it encouraged Anju to attend. In the early stages of group formation Share & Care place a lot of emphasis on leadership development. This involves the frank discussion of leadership styles, and helping the group establish leadership criteria. Because she was literate, and because of her gracious and humble character, Anju

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom, OUP, New York, 2002, p220

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 2.12

<sup>7</sup> An indigenous Nepali Christian NGO, and TEAR partner.



was elected as the group leader – despite the group’s disapproval of her faith. What’s more, when Share & Care established a second women’s group in the area, the members of that group felt that they did not have anyone with the right marriage of skills and character to appoint as leader, and so invited Anju to lead them as well!

Slowly but surely there has been an increasing willingness to accept Christian converts back as legitimate members of this small community. Anju’s election as leader of two women’s groups is evidence of this. Other very strong evidence is seen in an event that took place more recently. One Saturday, when the entire extended family had gone into Kathmandu for their once/month attendance at one of the large churches, the part of their home which also housed their water buffalos collapsed and buried the animals. By the time they had returned the community had rescued the buffalos. They believe that if this had happened at an earlier stage the wider community’s strong disapproval of them would have prevented such a positive and supportive action.

Miraculous healings are a consistent feature in the life and growth of the church in Nepal. I consider myself a typically sceptical, non-Pentecostal, western Christian in regard to such matters, but I have no shred of doubt that my Nepali brothers and sisters are experiencing Divine interventions of healing. Perhaps this, in part at least, explains the obvious joy and faith of several of the rural Christians I met on this trip. Moreover, this is despite strong negativity towards the emerging church in the wider community, where the predominant religion is that of Buddhism with a persistent animist overlay. One very damaging expression of this is the withdrawal of community support in a context where, because government services are few or non-existent, this can be disastrous.

Of course it is not impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It does happen, but only when that person, like the Zacchaeus the tax collector, has the humility to recognise their utter need of God’s healing love.

### **Kindness**

Probably the most widely recognised story that Jesus told is the story of a great kindness – the Samaritan whose kindness, expressed in the most practical and loving of actions, saved a stranger from certain death<sup>8</sup>.

What a contrast to another man in another of Jesus’ stories, the man who each day completely ignored the needs of the beggar Lazarus<sup>9</sup>. This rich man, had the capacity to transform Lazarus’s circumstances, but did nothing. Instead he lived a life of conspicuous consumption. His denial of Lazarus’ was more than a denial of the ethical teaching of his own religion, it was a denial of the kindness of God. He was like another rich man in another of Jesus’ stories, who built bigger and bigger barns to house his increasing wealth, instead of sharing it with those in need<sup>10</sup>.

These rich men should have taken notice of these words from Proverbs:

- Those who despise their neighbours are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor.” 14.21
- Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him.” 14.31

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 10.25-37

<sup>9</sup> Luke 16.19-31

<sup>10</sup> Luke 12.13-21

- Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in future.”

I am sure all of us have been on the receiving end of acts of kindness, and had our lives enriched as a result. In my time with TEAR partners I have witnessed acts of great kindness many, many times, and that is why despite what I see of great hardship and suffering, I almost always come away inspired rather than depressed.

On one occasion I was taken to visit several AIDS sufferers living in a Nairobi squatter community in Nairobi. My guide was Anna Okola. The people I met were her neighbours, and every day this compassionate and forceful woman would sit with them, put her arms around them, pray with them, and simply love them. It was impossible not to be affected by the terrible suffering of these men and women I met that day. Not only were they enduring terrible physical illness, they also had the added burden of wondering what was going to happen to their children after they died. It was in these harrowing circumstances that Anna, day after day, provided what comfort and care she could. I can think of no greater act of kindness.

Paul writes, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.”<sup>11</sup> Anna modelled this for me.

## Justice

Biblical justice is incredibly comprehensive in its requirements and consequences. Biblical justice is a restorative function - affirmative action on behalf of the powerless to restore their proper (meaning God-ordained) position in human society. It is concerned with fair wages and fair trading, with equality under the law so that there is not one law for the rich and well-connected, and another for the poor and marginalized. Biblical justice is about ensuring that the weak have access to all that which is needed to play a full and dignified role in human society, to experience life as God intended it to be. Biblical justice is a consequence of the fact that all men and woman are created in the image of God, and equally loved by him. Along with love justice it is absolutely fundamental to biblical ethics.

Unfortunately, while the Bible is crammed with the language of justice, its presence is often hidden or disguised from those who read the Bible in English because of what Stephen Mott describes as the ambiguities of the terms righteousness and judgement<sup>12</sup>. He suggests that as a rule of thumb whenever we come across the words righteousness or judgement in the context of social responsibility or oppression, we can assume that justice would be a better translation.

We have an added problem in the economically wealthy Bible belts of the rich world. I am referring to a propensity in this part of the Christian neighbourhood, to carefully avoid the Bible’s justice bits. One of the TEAR staff told me of their experience of sitting through 3 hours of lectures on Deuteronomy in which no mention was made of all the instructions to care for the poor, and protect their God-given rights. This is unpardonable!

It is critical that we acknowledge and endorse the biblical fact that a passion for justice is an integral part of the mandate God has given his people. God tells us, not just through the mouth of Micah, but also Amos and Isaiah, and Jesus himself, that

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<sup>11</sup> Colossians 3.12

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Mott’s Biblical Ethics and Social Change, OUP, New York, 1982, is in my opinion essential reading for anyone wanting to do a detailed study of Biblical justice.

social justice is so critical to faith that without it other forms of piety are worthless. We cannot afford to sideline that which God has said must be central and fundamental – for that is sin, and we end up witnessing to a caricature of God, and we end up proclaiming a truncated gospel. We must be a people who advocate on behalf of those who are weak and oppressed. Their cause must become our cause. In the words of Isaiah, we must “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

An integral part of this responsibility is the task of reminding all who are in positions of political power that God’s mandate for them is that they serve the poor, regardless of their political ideologies or religious persuasion. This message is at the heart of the Micah Challenge campaign<sup>13</sup>. In Psalm 82 we are given a graphic picture of all the political leaders of the world gathered together in a great assembly before the holy, awesome presence of God.

God asks them, *“How long will you defend the unjust, and show partiality to the wicked? And then he demands that they, “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of wicked.”*

The church in every country has a prophetic responsibility to remind political leaders everywhere that this is what God requires of them. I recognize and confess that this is so easy for us, living here in Australia, because we can do this without fear of imprisonment or persecution. All we might have to put up with is the spite and spleen of an angry politician, or barbed comments from some who sit in the pews alongside us.

In the case of the latter it is worth quoting Mott once more: *“Justice in the life of a Christian is a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit, for Christian justice is distinctive. It demands a willingness to put the interests of others before the interests of one’s self and one’s class...it is legitimate to ask how we have thwarted the grace of God, if our political choices invariably coincide with those of the rich in our society and not those of the poor and of racial minorities; let us not delude ourselves into thinking that neither the rich nor the poor know where their self-interest lies.”*<sup>14</sup>

When the church fulfils its prophetic responsibility amazing things can and do happen. Thomas Cahill asserts that “the radical society of friends, of free and equal men and women, that came forth from the side of the crucified was quickly overwhelmed by ancient patriarchy and has been overwhelmed in every era since by the social and political forms of the age... (but) whenever an individual or gathering has had the courage to confront the gospel anew, the society of its time has experienced transformation.”<sup>15</sup>

In recent decades we have seen the truth of this worked out in the struggle against the evil of apartheid in South Africa. A key leader in this struggle was Archbishop Desmond Tutu who demonstrated extraordinary courage and grace in his relentless opposition to the unjust oppression and exploitation of millions of people. On one occasion when heavily armed security forces were sent to intimidate him and others Tutu welcomed them and urged them to join the winning side. “How do I know we will win?” he asked. “Because I have read to the end of the book (Bible), and we win.”

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<sup>13</sup> See [www.micahchallenge.org.au](http://www.micahchallenge.org.au)

<sup>14</sup> Mott p 80

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, Lion, Oxford, 1999, p 203

Tutu was absolutely right. The Biblical testimony is that God is sovereign. We know that Jesus will return, and when that happens justice will prevail. This is the direction that history is flowing in.