

Ephiphany IV January 30th, 2011
Micah 6:1-8 I Cor 1:18-31 Mt 5:1-12

“...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

There once was a young man who was sentenced to prison for sixty years to life for murdering someone in the act of committing a robbery. He was twenty five years old at the time, so he'll be approaching eighty before he gets his first chance at parole, and there are no guarantees that parole will be granted.

If you were a member of the family of the murder victim, you might say that justice had been done. But here's the back-story about the young man. He was born into abject poverty. His father died when he was an infant and his mother was hardly present in his life. When she was around, her presence only brought chaos and fear. He was raised by relatives who treated him like just another mouth to feed. He had trouble in school because he suffered from ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and dyslexia, neither of which were ever addressed or helped. His neighborhood was overrun with gangs and to stay out of the gangs was a prescription for getting beaten and picked on almost daily. In summary, his life was tragic from the day he was born. This little baby had very little kindness in his life, and the only so-called justice he ever received was life in prison. What might “justice” have looked like for this little boy growing up?

The prophet Micah told the people of Israel 800 years before the birth of Jesus Christ that God had a requirement for them: to do justice, to love kindness (also translated goodness) and to walk humbly (or wisely) with their God. This Godly admonition for living holds true for us today, as well. But just what does it mean? The people of Israel at the time of Micah were guilty as a society of bad social ethics and a failure of leadership. They had been given the Ten Commandments and multiple other laws by God through Moses. They had been warned by other prophets that they were not living right lives. But they paid no attention to either the rules for living or the warnings. They did not care for the poor, for widows and orphans. They worshipped idols made by human hands. One of the greatest injustices at the time of Micah was the taking advantage of poor Israelites through forced labor. The lust for money and power was at the root of almost all the evils of the time. The unjust, unkind attitude of their culture against which God spoke through the prophet could be summed up in these words: “I've got mine – too bad for you!” God put them on trial for their behavior and attitudes. The Lord God brings a lawsuit against them. “Hear, you mountains, I will bring a lawsuit (the appropriate understanding of ‘controversy’ as it is used in the translation) against you, I will contend with Israel. I have done everything I could to help you, I have always been there for you, and this is how you repay me? Don't bother offering me sacrifices at the altar because they mean nothing to me. I am telling you that *morality* is more important to me than sacrifice.”¹

As a result of the (primarily) economic immorality of the Kingdom of Israel, the Kingdom fell. First, Samaria and the Northern Kingdom were destroyed. Then Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah, were sent into exile in Babylon, which today is modern-day Iraq.

¹ A paraphrasing of Micah 6:1-17

I believe that the moral values expressed by the prophet Micah contrast with the dominant values of our culture today. The words of the prophets have always been on the side of the have-nots in this world. Look at the prophetic words of Jesus in this morning's Gospel; we call this passage The Beatitudes or Blessings:

1. *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. *Blessed are those who mourn*, for they shall be comforted.
3. *Blessed are the meek*, for they will inherit the earth.
4. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, for they will be filled.
5. *Blessed are the merciful*, for they will receive mercy.
6. *Blessed are the pure in heart*, for they will see God.
7. *Blessed are the peacemakers*, for they will be called the children of God.
8. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
9. *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you* and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

There have been many books written by theologians about the meaning of these nine verses from Scripture. I could build more than one sermon on any one of them, let alone the full set. But let me just ask this question: Is there *anything* in any of those nine verses that captures the prevailing attitude or opinion of the dominant culture of the Western World? We all have choices about how we're going to live. We have free will. Are we going to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God – or are we going to yield to the dark side?

I was having a conversation the other day with one of my seven-year old grandchildren. She had just obtained a book about “Star Wars” at her school. She was reading it and asking me questions about Anakin Skywalker. For those of you who are not familiar with the “Star Wars” stories and movies, Anakin Skywalker is this wonderfully spunky talented heroic child character in the story, who eventually becomes Darth Vader, the paragon of darkness and evil. The particular book she had didn't take the story that far, so she asked me if Anakin Skywalker grew up to be the good-guy hero. I didn't tell her he became Darth Vader, but I did tell her that, sadly, when Anakin Skywalker got older he turned to the dark side. She was appalled. She wanted to be assured that eventually he got back on track and became a good-guy again. I didn't want to give away the whole plot, but I did tell her that at the VERY end he made a very good, heroic choice.

Then the questions got trickier. She asked me how it was that Anakin Skywalker had turned to the dark side. We called my son, the “Star Wars” expert, and his response was something like this. Anakin Skywalker turned to the dark side because he couldn't control his anger. He put a negative interpretation on everything that happened to him; it was all about him; and he grew more and more bitter and resentful of everyone and everything in his life. Eventually, he couldn't get back from the edge and he fell headlong into evil. He put himself and his lust for power and control at the center of his universe. I might have said it slightly different. I would have said he was consumed by his own pride. He embraced injustice, rejected kindness totally, and didn't even know the meaning of humility.

I think we are living in what might be called an Anakin Skywalker culture: it's all about MY needs, MY power, MY will. Yet when we follow Christ we commit to being counter-cultural. For Christians, it's all about the OTHER, the one in NEED, and GOD'S will, not our own.

We each have choices – every day...every day. What choices others might have made might have helped that little boy before it was too late and he ended up in prison? What choices help us to be kind to one another? Humble? Aware of (and working against) injustice? Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer to find ways to be open to the Micah's words and the blessings promised in the Beatitudes will be yours. And they will far excel any prize the world has to offer.