

## Engaging with the weekly Lectionary Readings

### Sunday 2 February 2014

The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year A  
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#### Comment and Questions

##### [Micah 6:1-8.](#)

The Lord has a controversy with Israel, and the prophet asks what the Lord requires.

“The reading from Micah reminds us God does not simply bless, but also calls and requires something of us. “What does the Lord require,” the prophet asks? “To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). God could not understand how the people could have so completely abandoned covenant after all that God had done for them, all the ways God had saved them time and again. All God wanted, and expected, in return were these three things—justice, mercy, and a humble walk with God.

There are strong parallels between these three attributes of covenant life with God and what Jesus identifies God blesses in the beatitudes. The message in the gospel is “God is blessing such people and such ways of living now that God’s kingdom has drawn near.” The message in the prophet is “if it is blessing you seek, live these ways!” [\[Source\]](#)

##### **Exploring Justice and Mercy (walking humbly?):**

What does it mean to do justice? Tim Keller writes, “When I was professor at a theological seminary in the mid-eighties, one of my students was a young man named Mark Gornik. One day we were standing at the copier and he told me that he was about to move into Sandtown, one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Baltimore. I remember being quite surprised. When I asked him why, he said simply, “To do justice.”

It had been decades since any white people had moved into Sandtown. For the first couple of years there, it was touch and go. Mark told a reporter, “The police thought I was a drug dealer, and the drug dealers thought I was a police officer. So, for a while there, I didn’t know who was going to shoot me first.” Yet over the years Mark, along with leaders in the community, established a church and a comprehensive set of ministries that have slowly transformed the neighborhood.

Although Mark was living a comfortable, safe lives, he became concerned about the most vulnerable, poor and marginalized members of our society, and made long-term personal sacrifices in order to serve their interests, needs and cause.

That is, according to the Bible, what it means to “do justice.” [\[Source\]](#)

Mercy is a force that compels us to acts of compassion. But in time mercy will collide with an ominous, opposing force: Injustice. Against this dark and overpowering force, acts of mercy can seem meagre. What good is a sandwich and a cup of soup when a severe addiction has control of a man’s life? Or a night in a shelter for a young woman who must sell her body to feed her child?

Perhaps that is why the Bible places equal emphasis on both mercy and justice. The ancient prophet Micah succinctly summarizes God’s design: “He has told you, oh man, what is good and what the Lord desires of you—that you love mercy and do justice and walk humbly with your God.”

**Love mercy:** Mercy is “compassion, kindness or forgiveness shown especially to someone a person has power over.”

**Do justice:** Justice is “fairness or reasonableness, especially in the way people are treated or decisions are made.”

Twinned together these commands lead us to holistic involvement. Divorced they become deformed. Mercy without justice degenerates into dependency and entitlement, preserving the power of the giver over the recipient. Justice without mercy grows cold and impersonal, more concerned about rights than relationships. The addict needs both food and treatment. The young woman needs both a safe place to sleep and a way out of her entrapping lifestyle. Street kids need both friendship and jobs." ROBERT D. LUPTON [\[Source\]](#)

### **Question for Reflection**

How would you describe one who does justice, loves mercy and humbly walks with God?

### **[Psalm 15.](#)**

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

### **Question for Reflection**

How do you see this psalm adding to the profile of one who does justice, loves mercy and humble walks with God?

### **[1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#)**

God's saving love confounds every source of human boasting. Let your only boasting be in the cross of Christ.

### **[Matthew 5:1-12.](#)**

The Sermon on the Mount begins with eight words of blessing.

"Who is Jesus speaking to? As He sees the crowds, He has a particular audience. He is speaking to a predominantly Jewish audience who have their situation in their minds. They were an oppressed people under occupation by a foreign army. These foreign occupations had been part of their history. The Jewish people had been trampled by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and finally the Romans. It was to this kind of people that Jesus was speaking. But more than that, they were also a people who had become disillusioned with their attempts at building a new world. They had been given the law that had given them the picture of the kind of society that God desired. They had heard the proclamation of the prophets as God's spokesmen challenged them again and again. And yet their best efforts had failed. They were unable to pull themselves up and develop a society that would be pleasing both to God and to themselves. Here too they had become disillusioned. Many were looking forward to a "day of the Lord;" a day when God would intervene and establish a golden era of righteousness, justice and peace. This new kingdom was to be a kingdom of God or, as Matthew terms it, "the Kingdom of Heaven". It would be a work of grace brought about by God's action. It is to these people that Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven". If we take that statement out of context we can easily hear it as bad news. We can hear it as saying, "we need to be the poor in spirit if we are to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven". The question that would then follow would be, "So, how can we set about making ourselves poor in spirit?" But that is not what that verse is saying. Jesus speaks to those who are the poor in spirit and He says, "You, poor in spirit, you who have been trodden upon, you who despair, know this -the Kingdom of Heaven is yours". There is no need for them to become the poor in spirit. That is what they are and to them comes the Kingdom of Heaven as a gift of God. They had become disillusioned in their own efforts. This Kingdom was the work of God.

Jesus continues and says to them, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". Must we mourn in order to be comforted? How do we become the mournful? Again, the wrong question. Jesus says, "To you who mourn for your land, your land under oppression, know this - you will be comforted. Know this - my Kingdom is among you, my Kingdom comes".

Again He says to those who are before Him, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth". Here He addresses one of the longings of the Jewish people to inherit the earth, the gift of land. He addresses the nation, "You, who are a meek nation, know this - God's promise to you - you will inherit the land".

And then again He says to His audience, "Blessed are those who hunger or thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled". The oppressed people, the disillusioned people, stand before Him. They hunger and thirst for a land of righteousness. They will be filled." (*Extract from a sermon by James Nicolson.*)

### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1) How do you find yourself among the poor in spirit, those who mourn; the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?

- 2) Read through the passage and, as it progresses, reflect on what the gift of grace is to each of the above categories. As you reflect on each section ask how you can receive and act on this gift of grace.