

Sermon, February 2nd, 2020. Remember, Review, Respond (*David Troughton*)

There will be Waitangi Day celebrations this Thursday, 6th February.

Micah, and other prophets of his time, Isaiah, Amos, raised questions in their day that we need to think about today.

The case Micah presented was:

They were not living the way God intended.

Businessmen and others were bent on exploitation.

There were all sorts of wrong religious practices,
stemming from quite wrong ideas about God.

Attitudes and actions have consequences;

How they were living would bring the nation down.

They were not acting as if they were responsible to God, and they seemed to have become oblivious to the way God had acted to develop and to save their nation in the past.

Our verse for today, Micah 6:7-8, is classic, easy to memorise, uncomplicated and practical.

“Will the LORD be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins?

No, the LORD has told us what is good.

What he requires of us is this:

to do what is just,

to show constant love, and

to live in humble fellowship with our God.”

Maybe we remember it as, “Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.”

Do we have a just society?

Are we recognising God in our lives,
we remembering what he has done for us.

Do we have a right view of God,
and are we worshipping him the way He wants?

So here it was, simply put:

Do what is just, show constant love, live in humble fellowship with God.

As for remembering, historically there is a significant Christian influence behind the Treaty of Waitangi. Historians often ignore it.

At the end of the eighteenth century, there were Christians in England who believed that God loves everyone equally. In Clapham, the minister was a former slave trader who had changed completely, John Newton, and spoke of it in his hymn, “Amazing Grace”. In his congregation were parliamentarians with social consciences, who were fighting the slave trade, for the right to establish schools for Indians in the territory of the East India Company, for the right of English villagers to

learn to read, extending suffrage (for males), child labour and working conditions. They were cooperating with Quakers in improving prisons. They formed a Church Missionary Society, following the Baptist Missionary society, and the London Missionary Society that worked in the South Pacific.

They were concerned with how badly British colonists the USA and Australia, as well as in India, had treated their indigenous populations.

With concern for the Maori very much in mind, they formed an Aboriginal Protection Society. Because of Britain's unsatisfactory colonial record, they initially opposed New Zealand coming under the colonial office, but when they saw the threats to Maori from the New Zealand Company and others, they realised some form of responsible government was needed - one that respected Maori.

In the Colonial Office were a couple of their sons, Lord Glenelg, and also Wilberforce's nephew, Sir James Stephens, whose father had helped Wilberforce with legal aspects of the fight against slavery.

By the end of the 1830s, they were influential in getting the British government to take on New Zealand, so that there was some kind of control over the way Maori were being treated.

Missionaries such as Henry Williams were very strong advocates on behalf of the well-being of Maori, involving themselves in peace-making, but also pushing back on their behalf against Europeans such as the New Zealand Society, whose leaders were keen to run New Zealand as a business themselves, and wanted to take land so they could fulfil the promises which they had made when enlisting the early settlers.

Henry Williams was from the Church Missionary Society, and the CMS had been very supportive of Maori from the beginning. Prior to that, since 1805, Samuel Marsden had been coming to know and respect some Maori quite well. On his way to England, he had met a seriously abused Maori on board ship, and while they travelled together for the three months by sailing ship to and from the UK, he started to learn the language. He had welcomed them to his farm when they went on trading expeditions to Sydney. He had started an early dictionary, and very probably preached in Maori at that first sermon back in 1814; we know Chief Ruatara had to clarify points that people struggled to understand- maybe language or pronunciation, maybe concepts.

So this very forward-looking, significant experiment in inter-racial partnership that the Treaty of Waitangi represents was born out of the advocacy of Christians attempting to do justly. Missionaries were there, standing their ground on behalf of Maori despite slander and misrepresentation, (even by Governor Grey) on the basis of principle that had been confirmed by their experience over 40-50 years. Maori were there, partnering with them- such as Te Rauparaha's son Tamihana, who became a Christian and then a peacemaker, and there were Te Whiti and the people of

Parihaka who were defending themselves by peaceful resistance initiated on Biblical principles evolved by Christian Maori.

Maori Christians and missionaries combined to provide leadership together, and tried to do justly, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.

We are inspired by this aspect of our history as we look to the future.

Did Christians face other serious challenges of principle in the mid-century?

One was advocated by the editor of the Whanganui Herald, John Ballance, who later became colonial secretary to Governor Grey, and in due course Prime Minister. In those early days, he was applying the idea of survival of the fittest, Social Darwinism, and was saying that the Maori just had to accept that they were contending with (and would succumb to) a superior white race.

There is another aspect of our Christian history to recognise. Have you seen people point the finger at missionaries, alleging they were there to colonise?

Understandably, the degree of identification with the colonising power will have varied with individuals. However, it is important to realise that the vision, and costly commitment, of missionaries in many countries all around the globe have meant that indigenous peoples were actually prepared for decolonisation.

As NZ Presbyterians, we have all played a part in that. Lynley Clarke, who is playing the organ this morning, can bear this out. Her husband, Ian, helped build Onesua High School in Vanuatu, and she herself joined him on other projects some years later. When Vanuatu became independent, every leader in the new government had been educated in the school that we New Zealand Presbyterians had established- in collaboration with Australians.

We should remember, also, that others (such as the Free Church of Scotland settlers in Otago) had a sense of calling to apply Christian principles in nation-building. An example of a present-day outcome is that, in the values surveys, regular church-goers are more welcoming of other newcomers to NZ than infrequent or non-churchgoers.

The prophets challenged various expressions of religion in their day.

They exposed the false and explained the true.

How do you respond to this modern expression of faith:

“The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet....”

That phrase, ‘is just a’, immediately signals reductionism.

And it easily leads to inadequate religious views, often atheistic faiths.

Does another example help? “A violin is just horse-hair, gut, glue and wood.”

That gives absolutely no clue as to what can emerge when the components are brought together, what beauty and sensitivity!

A jig, the Londonderry Air, Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto in E minor!

"So, Stephen Hawking, we cannot describe humanness by listing the component chemicals. We do not accept being devalued by the derogatory description, 'chemical scum'. What is more, we are experiencing an amazing illustration of what can be done with your 'moderate-sized planet' and an 'average star'."

We are experiencing a *miracle*!

From these very elements emerges *carbon-based life*, on a very *particular* planet, that is *strategically* sited, and which has a *special* environment that can sustain life.

That miracle includes *human* life, with all our racial diversity.

We are physical, but we are not just physical.

We are beings who can analyse and problem-solve, can imagine and create, who can even travel out into the universe.

And there is even more to being human than that, we are in relationships!

We are *persons*!

The 'scum'-based faith, often an atheistic religious faith, definitely does not cut it.

Another damaging folk-religious approach says:

we are going through re-incarnations, and who we are now is locked into how we lived in previous existences; to change from that would be to act against our karma, even against God.

Micah proclaims that *that is not so*.

With God there is grace. There is hope.

We are not treated in the way we deserve, punitively for ever.

At the end of his book, he asks, 'Who is a pardoning God like you?'

"There is no other god like you, O LORD;

you forgive the sins of your people who have survived.

You do not stay angry forever,

but you take pleasure in showing us your constant love.

You will be merciful to us once again.

We do not have to buy off God- specifically not with lavish or with extravagant religious acts. God definitely does not want that.

Ah! Ours is not a 'scum'-based faith, it's a divine love-based faith!

This week, we celebrate 180 years since the signing of The Treaty of Waitangi, We return to the Micah questions we should be asking ourselves and our nation:-

Do we remember and appreciate what God has done in our society?

Are our attitudes to religion false or true?

Are we worshipping God;

acknowledging God in our society, in the way that he wants us to?

How are we responding to the offer of forgiveness by a pardoning God?

The LORD has told us what is good.

What he requires of us is this:

to do what is just, to show constant love,

and to live in humble fellowship with our God.