

**Comments****Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**

Ordinary/Lectionary 4

**Year A**

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.  
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**Micah 6:1-8**

NRSV

Micah was roughly contemporary with Isaiah. He was a fearless champion of the oppressed and under-privileged, who attacked the socio-economic injustice of his day: wealthy capitalists oppressed peasant landowners. The scene for today's reading is a lawcourt ("plead your case"). Israel is on trial for contravening the Sinai covenant; the witnesses are the whole cosmos: the "mountains ... hills" and "foundations of the earth" (v. 2). (The earth was thought to stand on pillars.) God has a *bone to pick* ("controversy", lawsuit) with Israel ("his people") for forgetting that he has saved her in the past and for not walking in his ways. He speaks in vv. 3-5: what more could I have done? I cared for you and protected you. I delivered you from slavery in "Egypt" (v. 4); I gave you great leaders. Recall how when, during the Exodus, after you defeated the Amorites, I stymied Balak's (v. 5) devious scheme: he hired the prophet "Balaam" to curse you, but he blessed Israel! I gave you safe passage across the Jordan. ("Shittim" was Israel's last camping place before crossing and "Gilgal" the first on the west bank of the river.) I saved then, and I will do so again.

In v. 6, Israel, the defendant, pleads her case: God, what can we do to make amends for our infidelity? Will you be pleased with sacrifices, especially "burnt offerings" (which were total, because nothing was left for consumption by the priests) of "calves" (which were especially valuable)? Would repeated offerings of rams and of oil (used in the liturgy for lamps, sacred anointings and purification) satisfy you? Should we sacrifice our eldest sons (as Canaanites do)? Perhaps Micah speaks in v. 8: no, God requires internal conversion and a proper spiritual attitude. He has told you what he expects: to be godly, ("to do justice ... to love kindness"), to hold him in proper respect and to walk in his ways.

**Psalm 15**

NRSV

This psalm was likely used in a liturgy of admission to the Temple. An inquirer or pilgrim asks God: who may come to Mount Zion ("hill") to worship in the Temple ("your tent")? Who is acceptable to you? Vv. 2-5a are the answer spoken by an officiant: those who (1) are ethical ("walk blamelessly") in their words and deeds; (2) do not wrong other Israelites ("friends ... neighbours", v. 3) by what they say and do; (3) despise evil-doers and honour those who hold God in awe (v. 4); and (4) charge no "interest" (v. 5) on loans to the needy and accept no bribes. They will never be hindered by obstacles ("moved") in their lives.

**1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

NRSV

The "message" of Christ crucified, risen and alive is God's power to us, but to those who hear the good news and reject "the cross" it is nonsense. This, Paul

says, God prophesied through Isaiah (v. 19). He has decried divisions in the church at Corinth; he now recognizes two groups of humans: the "wise" (v. 19) and "those who believe" (v. 21). Are, he asks rhetorically, the Jewish "scribe" (v. 20) and the rationalist ("debater") – both possessors of worldly wisdom – truly wise? Through the coming of Christ, God has shown worldly wisdom to be folly, for (v. 21) one can't "know God through wisdom", i.e. in a philosophical way. *Knowing God* is experiential. In fact, God chose to save believers through the apparent folly of what Paul preaches ("our proclamation"). To "demand signs" (miracles, v. 22) is to refuse to trust in God; "Jews" refused Christ due to their particular expectations in a messiah. To "desire wisdom" is to construct a religion whose demands one is prepared to accept. (The "Greeks" in v. 22 are unbelieving *non-Jews*.) God's ways are not human ways (v. 25).

Consider yourselves, Christians at Corinth (v. 26): few of you are what *the world* would have chosen: few are *worldly wise*, "powerful" or aristocratic. But God's way is to choose those of apparently little account ("foolish", "weak", v. 27) to show the apparently important that they are wrong, to "shame" them. This is God's paradoxical way (v. 28); he does away with boasting. Christ's living in human form started a new way of being human (v. 30): we are set apart for his purposes ("sanctification") and no longer controlled by evil ("redemption") so that we become one with God ("righteousness") – so that we can (as God commanded through Jeremiah) "boast in the Lord" (v. 31). Christ is true wisdom.

**Matthew 5:1-12**

NRSV

Jesus ascends a mountain in Galilee where he speaks to his "disciples", his followers, in the Sermon on the Mount – but the "crowds" hear too: see 7:28, the end of the Sermon. He speaks of the new era he has come to initiate. Vv. 3-12 are known as the Beatitudes, from the Latin for *blessed*. To be "blessed" is to be happy. All the qualities are expected of the faithful, for the consequence is the same: they will enjoy God's end-time rule. In fact, the Kingdom has already begun, but is not yet completed. They will attain (and are attaining) eternal life.

The "poor in spirit" (v. 3) are probably detached from wealth and dependant on God alone. Those who "mourn" (v. 4) the reign of evil forces on earth will be "comforted" and strengthened in the Kingdom. The "meek" (v. 5), people who do not press for personal advantage, will share in God's rule. Those who "hunger" (v. 6, who ardently pursue God's will and purpose for his people), and do so single-mindedly and sincerely, "the pure in heart" (v. 8), will come to know God intimately ("see God"). The "merciful" (v. 7) are those who pardon and love others (especially the poor). The "peacemakers" (v. 9), those who seek *shalom*, the total state of well-being God provides through Christ, "will be called children of God", for they share in God's work. Finally vv. 10-12: those spreading the good news, striving to reconcile the world to God, will be persecuted because of the message they carry (as were Old Testament "prophets"). They too should "rejoice and be glad" for God will reward them. Jesus tells his audience that the values for admission to the Kingdom are the reverse of those valued by materialists.