

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4C
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
FATHER JORDAN GREATBATCH

Micah 5:2-5a
Magnificat
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1: 39-45

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.*

*And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.*

The United Church of Christ minister Nancy S Taylor says of these words that 'Among the most beloved of Old Testament texts, these extraordinary verses in Micah speak hope to despair with a clarity and power that is nothing less than thrilling.' And it is hard to disagree. Our First Testament reading from Micah today has the power to speak through the centuries to the anxieties, troubles and confusion of almost every generation. You

see when Micah wrote these words in the eighth century BC, he inhabited a world full of loss and insecurity.

The Assyrian Empire's menacing shadow was hovering over the southern kingdom of Judah. This was coupled with internal strife as the leaders in Jerusalem out of desperation oppressed their own people to pay significant sums of tribute to keep the Assyrians at bay. And not only did the people face the threat of war and violence but also economic ruin at the hands of their own rulers.

As we heard a grim economic outlook be presented this week by treasury it is no surprise that in our times there is anxiety, anger and confusion. Perhaps here in little old New Zealand we don't live under the threat of war but we are mindful that we live in an ever more threatening world. We have had years of economic strife fueled by the Pandemic and other factors which have made people ever more suspicious of our rulers. And not just our rulers but those who are supposed to hold them to account, our news media. In a recent poll trust in traditional news media as plummeted. In April the latest Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand report found trust in news in general tumbled from 42 percent in 2023 to just 33 percent this year. The proportion of people who actively avoided the news "to some extent" grew from 69 percent in 2023 to a whopping 75 percent in 2024. This has a huge effect on our society which gives an increase to suspicion, anxiety and despair.

And while we may look towards prime ministers and finance ministers, mayors and councillors to come to our aid Micah is pointing in a whole different direction. He is pointing to a humble back water, a town called Bethlehem. He is pointing to a leader who 'stands in the strength of the Lord' (v4). And what a better story of the humble and meek inheriting the earth than our Gospel reading from Luke today. The words from the Gospel of John's first chapter come to mind.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46)

Truly in the eyes of the more sophisticated it was something of a backwater. Yet this is the place God chooses to enter our world – not Rome, not Athens, nor any of the other great centres of power, culture and learning in the world of the time.

You see for us as Christians we understand God's remedy to the anxiety and trouble that surrounds us is not found in the elite of our day but the birth of the one, whom we will soon declare as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus of Nazareth.

It is a consistent theme through the Bible that God delights in upsetting human expectations. Abraham and Sarah did not expect to bear a child in old age, and yet Isaac, whose name means "he laughs," was such a preposterous surprise that it prompted Sarah's laughter (Genesis 20:1–7). David, who was the smallest of his brothers, was anointed as the king (1 Samuel 16). Likewise, the ruler promised in Micah's oracle will come from an unexpected place, in an unexpected way.

This divine habit of eschewing expectations also echoes in the New Testament, as Mary receives a surprise announcement that she will bear a child (Luke 1), and as Jesus enters the world not as a triumphant ruler but as a vulnerable infant.

The point being that God more often than not surprises us from unexpected places. A few months ago, I read of the story of a magazine called *Death to the World* which was started by monks and nuns from the St Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina, California, as a medium of evangelism to teens involved in the punk subculture by monastics who were ex-punks themselves.

The first issue was printed in the December of '94 featuring a monk holding a skull on the cover. The hand-drawn bold letters across the top read "DEATH TO THE WORLD, The Last True Rebellion" and the back cover held the caption: "they hated me without a cause." The first issue,

decorated with ancient icons and lives of martyrs inside, was advertised in *Maximum Rock'n'roll* and brought in letters from all around the world.

The magazine stopped publishing but was later revived by convert members of Saint Barnabas Antiochian Orthodox Church in Costa Mesa, California. New issues are submitted to the St Herman monks for editing and revision, and are released quarterly.

The magazine had a considerable impact on counter culture youth during the mid to late 90s. Who would have thought that a group of ex-punk rockers could have such an impact on a subculture that is known for its hostility to religion and institutions.

As we approach the great mystery of the incarnation this Christmas, we may be tempted to present a tamed down message of this profound and revolutionary story, a story that changed the world. And though we meet and adore the Christ Child in all his vulnerability we must not forget his profound roots. As people continue to look at other narratives to find meaning, whether its punk rock or consumerism, or technology the message of Advent and Christmas is that the most revolutionary act has already happened. Namely, Emmanuel, God with us in all the muck and the mire and the difficulties of life. And in those profound words of Micah, *he shall be one of peace*. May we know that peace this Advent, a peace that passes all understanding and is a remedy to the anxiety of our age.