

Year A, Epiphany 4, 1st February 2026

Micah 6:1-8. 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31. Matthew 5: 1-12.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I am quite puzzled by some of the readings set for each Sunday because I can't always make any sensible connection between them, I can't see a discernible thread running through them.

That's in contrast to this week, where the readings seem to go hand in glove with each other. Let me start with the Psalm set for today, Psalm 15. Probably written before there was even a temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the psalmist asks who may live on God's holy mountain.

The answer is to be someone whose way of life reflects the way God made us to be, in other words merciful, slow to anger, compassionate and abounding in love. In other words, it's all about relationships, not just our relationship with God, but also our relationships with other people, both inside and outside our church communities. To put it simply, love God and love your neighbour.

In our Micah reading, the prophet imagines God putting the Israelites on trial with creation as the jury. Imagine, rocks that have seen it all, that have been there for literally billions of years, they have seen how the Israelites have behaved. God tells them exactly what he has done for them down the generations, and the response is well, how shall we come and worship the Lord? A thousand rams, 10,000 rivers of oil, sacrifice our first-born child?

In effect they are asking, shall we double down on all the normal requirements of church. If we worship well enough on a Sunday will that satisfy you and make up for all the damage we have done to the environment and other people the other six days of the week?

No, says Micah, the answer is the same as it was in the Psalm, act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. That's all we have to do to live on God's holy mountain.

There's a passage in Amos 5, which puts it even more starkly. The first four-and-a-half chapters of Amos are like an unstoppable rant about how the Israelites have completely failed to walk the talk, let alone walked the walk.

I love how Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message.

“I can’t stand your religious meetings.

I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions.

I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I’m sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.

When was the last time you sang to *me*? Do you know what I want? I want justice—oceans of it. I want fairness—rivers of it. That’s what I want. That’s *all* I want.

Nowadays we live in an age where many people don’t see humility as a virtue, in an age when many people find just keeping body and soul together a real challenge. Having the energy and time to show loving kindness to other people can often seem a step too far, but whatever our circumstances there is always something we can do, however small and insignificant it may seem.

This whole theme continues in our Corinthians reading, where Paul reminds the worshipping community in the Church there that the kind of sacrifice and compassion symbolised by the Cross can seem weak and foolish to the outside world.

He upbraids them for the way many followers of Jesus have adopted the boastful and discriminatory ways of the world around them, apparently feeling that the gifts of the Spirit they have received somehow exempt them from the need to be compassionate and just to each other, let alone the outside world. Isaiah talks in Chapter 29 of how people honour God with their lips but not in their hearts and Paul reminds them how in that Isaiah passage God says he will destroy the wisdom of the wise. Paul is basically making the same plea as Micah, be humble, remember who you were before God chose you and if you are going to boast then just boast in God.

And that leads us on to the Beatitudes at the start of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, his first public sermon, at least in the sense of having come down to us in Scripture. Actually, it was fundamentally addressed to the disciples, with the crowds not mentioned again until Chapter Seven. Jesus was in teaching rather than preaching mode.

Many commentators regard the Beatitudes as indicative rather than a command, in other words they embody the principles by which we should try and live our lives in relation to others, knowing of course that there will be

times when we fall far short. For certain, they are not transactional. Whatever Jesus is trying to teach it is not that if we try harder to live up to those qualities that somehow God will appreciate us more than he already does. Equally we shouldn't walk away from reading them with a sense of shame because we are more privileged than the people he is blessing, because God has no interest in shaming us either.

Others see them almost as statements of fact, that Jesus is lifting up those who are already peacemakers, already pure in heart, who are already thirsting for righteousness and justice and so on. In other words Jesus is acknowledging that the world has plenty of people who demonstrate what it means to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

I don't think that it is necessarily a case of either or, as both interpretations seem to me to be perfectly valid. Either way one of the underlying themes of all the readings is that we are to live, or certainly try to live, with loving kindness.

According to ancient Jewish theology, loving kindness is one of the three pillars on which the world is built. Chesed, a Hebrew word that translates roughly as loving kindness, can be found nearly 250 times in the Torah alone, the first five books of the Old Testament.

Much of the season of Epiphany is centred on how Jesus came in order to be the light of the world, and all four readings invite us to imagine that we too can live lives that manifest the light, life and love of Christ seven days a week.

I want to spend a few moments talking about the word blessed. First off, it's hard to define exactly what it means, not least because it has several meanings. Perhaps it's more relevant to think about what it feels like when you're blessed by God.

The first thing of course is that you can't earn God's blessing, it's purely and simply a gift. One way of describing what it feels like to be blessed by God is feeling like having God's unconditional regard and so having the capacity to rise above one's present circumstances. It feels like you have worth, not because of anything that you've done but simply because of who you are and because you deserve it.

One thing that has changed over the years is the current need for affirmation, for example giving everyone who takes part in a school sports day a prize whether they have won or come last. That sort of affirmation is ultimately empty.

The negative equivalent of affirmation is blame, which has become a national pastime – the fault is always someone else's, never one's own. So clearly God's blessing is far more valuable than either worthless affirmation or playing the blame game.

Second, when it comes to the Beatitudes why does Jesus name these people as blessed? They're certainly generally not the people society regards as blessed – apart from possibly peacemakers. And that's probably the point. Jesus is far more interested in character than in success, especially as defined in worldly terms

Because whatever the Beatitudes are, Jesus is not giving us a recipe for success or the keys to happiness, rather he is reminding us that God invariably turns up where we least expect him so that he can give us what we can't earn or achieve – blessing.

It's precisely when we are disappointed or in despair that we are most likely to be open to the presence of God, a God who gives without asking directly for anything in return and who blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Perhaps what we should notice above all about the start of the Sermon on the Mount is that it begins with blessings. We begin with blessing, not judgement, not terms and conditions, not anything else.

What does that mean for us? For a start, it means we don't act justly, love mercy and walk humbly in order to earn God's blessing. We do those things because we are already and always blessed.

Just as Jesus made it his priority to bless his disciples before anything else, we too need to make it our priority to bless others as we have been blessed.