

Micah 7:8-end John 3:14-21

We're going to look at the passage from Micah tonight. It's a passage that reminds me of some of the Psalms with the ebb and flow of the passage. There's a too and fro between the writer and God. This being a book of prophecy, there are times when the writer speaks for the people and sometimes speaks for God. It's in this back and forth that conclusions are reached – though the people have sinned, God will have compassion.

So, what's the background? Micah was writing his book sometime in the mid 8th and early 7th century BC during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah. It was a time when God's people had turned away from him. Far from worshipping God in the temple, they were now worshipping idols at altars on high places. Some of these high places have been excavated in recent times and show conclusive signs of what the people got up to – the remains of cannabis resin and child sacrifice – this was getting as far away from God as it was possible to do. It's into this type of situation that God speaks through Micah.

Now if we were God, what would we do, I wonder? The depths of that rejection and the cruelty of their idol worship would probably give us a strong desire to smite them off the face of the earth. These people have become a stain upon the face of the earth. Far from being a light to the nations, they have now become an embarrassment and a source of shame. As other nations look at Israel and the broken state they were in, there would have been, as verse 8 says gloating going on – look at what has become of them.

But this fallen state of the people is not their end. "Though I have fallen, I will rise, though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light". Despite everything, God is still for his people. That's not to say that there won't be a price to pay – Micah knows that the people must still bear God's wrath – but God is still a God of the covenant he made with his people. The final verses make this clear, "You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago."

One of the charges thrown against God as seen in the Old Testament is that he is a cruel God and I'm not going to deny that there are times when a passage brings me up short. But within a passage like this, we start to see the breadth of the character of God as well as his purposes. God is a God of justice but he is also a God of compassion. The people have erred from the way they should have been going and so God quite rightly brings in his correction. But there is never a point where he entirely gives up on his people. He made a promise and he will keep it – nothing the people do will make God abandon them entirely. God keeps his promises because, through them, he will be a light to the nations, "as in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders. Nations will see and be ashamed..."

For Micah, he would never see on this earth the powerful way that God would fulfil his promises. The passage from John 3 very much picks up the theme. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." The high point of God's promises is reached in the incarnation, Jesus coming as man to bring the promise of eternal life "whoever believes in him is not condemned."

What we have to acknowledge though is that God doesn't force us into a decision on his promises. All the way through the Old Testament when God speaks of his covenant promises, God says

something similar to this, "I lay before you the choice..." People could either choose to accept the offer of God, or to reject it. It's the essence of free will, we are not robots. And here as well, Jesus lays out the choices in pictorial fashion – light or darkness. In John's first chapter we are told that, "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light..." We walk in darkness because, like the people in Micah's day, we have all rejected God's ways. We may not be involved in idol worship but we all prefer our ways to God's. But this light gives a second chance. Yes, the light will expose the rottenness of human hearts but it's not done in a way to gloat or condemn. Rather this light is there to heal and forgive. We are all offered the chance to step into the light and way from the dark.

But the choice is ours, we can choose instead to stay in the darkness. We can choose to carry on our own ways. But we need to understand that that choice has consequences.

This is Lent season, a time for reflection. And what these passages urge us to do is to look at where we stand. Are we standing in the light or are we standing in the darkness? And where do we want to be standing in the light of in the darkness? Wherever we see ourselves, the promise is there though, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Leaving the dark for the light does not expose us to condemnation but rather the light bathes us in the love and compassion of God, healing and forgiving us, now and for all eternity.