

## Advent Sermon on Micah 5: 2-5a

### O Little Town of Bethlehem

Here we go: It is Advent again.

“Advent” means “coming”.

And, as every year, we are invited to reflect on the coming of God.

God coming to us.

At Christmas.

The child in the manger.

Bethlehem.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans of Judah,  
out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,  
whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”

Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labour bears a son,  
and the rest of his brothers return  
to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace. Micah 5: 2-5a

For Christians the Old Testament does not stand on its own, but is also a book about Jesus, in the sense that it prepares for the coming of the Messiah and the new people of God. And although Jesus may not be the principal subject of the Old Testament, Christians have claimed that Jesus is the true fulfilment of all hopes and expectations which we find in the Old Testament. In this regard it is significant that Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). For Jesus the promise of the Old Testament was realized in his ministry. And for the people who followed Jesus, Jesus was the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of old.

Time and again the prophets, for example, when they spoke of the one to come, spoke more than they actually knew. And this is not surprising.

Because first and foremost the prophets had a message to bring to the people of their own day. Their task was not to foretell the future but to foretell God's word, God's story with his people.

The prophet Micah's task was to be the advocate of God among a people who had forgotten that they were God's chosen children. Disaster was on the way. Some prophets, priests and rulers had fed the people with a false optimism. The majority thought all was going to be okay, and only Micah and a few others saw that no good times were coming.

Micah's task was to alert the people to the danger, and to challenge their trust in a God who would always protect them.

Micah had to tell them that God saw their sin and their disobedience... God had kept his promises, Micah said, but the people had not. The greed of the wealthy and the powerful who seized the property and possessions from persons weaker than them, the failures of the rulers and priests, lead Micah to talk of coming disasters. Jerusalem, he said, would become a heap of ruins...

But then, in all the laments and predictions of destruction, Micah turns to words of hope.

That is where today's sermon text comes on stage.

Does Micah need a break from all the heaviness of doom? Does he see that punishment is never the final word of God? Does he know deep inside that hope is possible even in the face of terrible situations that cannot be changed?

The promise of a new ruler to come from the town of Bethlehem is so familiar to us Christians. It is often cited during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

The Wise Men quote Micah 5:2 in response to Herod's question about where the Messiah would be born.

Bethlehem is the home town of David.

If Micah locates the birth place of the new king, the new ruler in David's town, he makes people see the continuation of the ancient promises that God had given to David.

Although Israel endured the reigns of some terrible kings, and then saw the entire loss of the monarchy and the take-over by all sorts of mighty and power-obsessed neighbouring nations, hope remained that God had not withdrawn the promise that a son of David would always sit on the throne. At the time of Jesus, many Jews still looked for such a Messiah...

Who is the new king from Bethlehem?

There are various answers to this question.

But in Advent we, of course, remember that Christians had so long associated this text with the birth of Jesus that it is hard to read it otherwise. In Advent we are interested in the prophets and what they predict concerning the person of Jesus.

In this text 700 years before the first Christmas, the prophet Micah shared with the people that a future ruler, shepherd of the people, bringer of security and peace, should come from Bethlehem.

The child born there would be a king whose greatness and peace would one day fill the whole earth.

Micah's Advent themes are Hope and Peace. "God is coming," he says. "In your weakness be people of hope."

Bethlehem is a small Judean village, some five or six miles to the south of Jerusalem. It stands on a grey limestone ridge, surrounded by fertile countryside. It lived up to its name "House of Bread".

Micah lived in a time of great darkness.

God's people had failed.

They were oppressed by the Assyrians, defenceless and weak.

And yet, says Micah, there was still hope!

God was going to send a king. But he passed by Jerusalem, turned his back on the seat of government and human power, and turned his attention to little Bethlehem. A tiny spot from which a ruler would come.

Hope would spring forth from weakness, from a child of poverty, born in a cattle shed, in an insignificant market town.

God goes back to the roots of King David.

The prophet Isaiah predicts the same thing.

God brings forward his salvation through human weakness.

A shoot growing from a stump (Isa 11).

A child of Bethlehem, born in a feeding trough, who becomes a refugee, a homeless preacher, who is crucified on a wooden cross.

Human weakness - and God uses it.

He or she is not interested in capital cities, or armies, or presidents.

The world has fallen into darkness under the grip of evil power.

There is hopelessness, powerlessness, the need of salvation.

The people long for someone who restores the world to a good place.  
According to Micah the expected king comes as a child, utterly dependent,  
vulnerable.

He can't look after himself.

He lives a humble life.

God chooses what is weak in the world.

He did it then; and he does it now.

The fact that we do not perceive ourselves to be important does not mean to say that God has not got important things to do through us.

God keeps his promises.

In a way that was beyond Micah's imaginings, God's Messiah did come from Bethlehem.

Micah believed that God had a wonderful future in store: Peace, and the day when nations "shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks," and war shall be no more. The day too will come when all will "sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees," and economic oppression will come to an end.

God will come; and, for the people, there will be well-being!

As Christians in Advent we see Jesus in Micah's passage.

But we should not forget that Micah's prophecy was a word of hope intended to address the distress of people who live in a particular time and place.

God would finally send some decent rulers to relieve the terrible situation of abuse of power, corruption, violence and oppression.

There would be security in the future, integrity, justice, peace...

Can a biblical text that seems obviously speaking to a specific people in times long ago somehow be freed from its earliest historical context so that it can continue to speak a word from God to a world that constantly faces new challenges?

The book of Micah spoke to his contemporaries. It spoke to the people in Jesus' time, when they searched the scriptures to find passages that would help to understand who Jesus was.

Micah also speaks to us today.

We read his words in a time and place far distant from the prophet's time.

We are not Micah's first audience.

But our questions are not unlike those raised by the people in old Israel.

Our fears are similar.

Our sins are similar.

Our need for a word of warning and a glimmer of hope beyond the everyday demands may be similar.

And, so we stretch the meaning of the ancient text so that it can speak to us directly.

And: we are allowed to see more than is actually there.

We can see more than Micah meant to say.

The text is not Micah's, nor does it belong to ancient Israel.

It belongs to all people who need it.

To all who need words of hope, images of peace, and dreams of justice.

The text is not limited to Micah's time.

God's spirit continues to work through this text. It gives us words of hope and peace. It strengthens our faith and enables us to share what we believe with others. It wants to help us understand God's will for our time and place. It keeps us in touch with God.

Micah had a dream. He dreamed of a day when peace would fill the earth. We too dream of a day when war shall be no more. We dream of peace for our neighbours. We dream of peace for the whole world. We dream of peace in Bolivia, in Syria, in Hongkong, in Iran and in any other trouble spot of this bruised earth with its heart-aching people.

The lesson for Advent in our text can be that we watch out for peace, that we learn peace, and that we practice peace; that we submit to the God in the child, and, in our weakness, work for peace.

With God the dream of peace can come true.

And with Jesus who showed us how to make peace, we can help it happen in the world.

Let us this Advent, be people of hope and peace.

Let us trust in God, love our neighbours, and point to the glorious future God has in store for us.

Nothing more, and nothing less.

Advent for Future.

Amen.