

Reading

What is written in the law?

by *Merryl Blair*

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (Luke 10.25-26)

Luke's Jesus responds to a lawyer's question about eternal life by bringing together two themes that permeate his gospel: that 'what is written in the law' is still valid for the Christian community, and that what can be 'read there' is to do with loving God and neighbour. The heart of 'the law' is probably best summed up in Micah 6: 8.

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God."

Micah's agenda for living as the people of God cuts to the core of what it means to be a community that reflects the character of God into the world. Luke shows a similar concern for getting back to enduring values for his community. So, what do we read there?

Micah 6: 8 comes as the climax of a passage shaped as a covenant law-suit. God is indicting Israel, and in fact all humanity, for forgetting who God really is, and therefore failing to live in a way that reflects God's character. In the process of this law-suit, Israel is reminded of its history: how God has become known to them in that history as a God of mercy, deliverance and relationship. Forgetting this has allowed the people to treat each other without mercy, to live as if still enslaved, and to ignore relationship for a purely personal piety. These three elements, insists Micah, must shape our lives as people of God.

"Do Justice"

To act justly is to recognise several important characteristics of the God who has called us to be a community that reflects God's nature:

God is a lover of Justice

In the long story of God's relationship with God's people, justice is the starting place. Rather than a punitive issue, it is a desire to see all things in their rightful place, with their rightful value.

God's liberation of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt was based on the desire not only to condemn an unjust social structure, but also to model a new way of being in community. In God's community, all people should have a share in goods and services, and power should be used to speak for those without power. This passion for justice comes through in every part of Old Testament literature, law, prophets and writings, and is echoed in Luke's account of Jesus' first public statement (Luke 4: 16-21).

God's desire for Justice is dynamic and transformative

It continually calls for change, and causes change, to ensure that all may have abundant life. Micah's prophetic call for justice came from a context in which rapacious state powers were trying to squeeze the peasants (the traditional land-owners) off their land through exorbitant taxation, unjust judicial systems and a callous attitude to the problems of the small land-holder. God, speaking through the prophet, shows 'Godness' to be a concern for the rights of those who cannot speak for themselves (Micah 2: 1-2; 3: 1-2, 8-9). The prophet will not be put off by fancy political talk, but names things as they actually are: he (Micah) insists that injustice is the fault of those with social power; he points out that God's agenda includes a concern with economics, that is, access to and control of the basic necessities of life; he shows that economic issues and religious issues cannot be separated, because justice is to do with rooting out the evil in a social system that allows some to be valued less than others. In other words, social justice is clearly shown to be a theological concern.

Micah does more than simply critique the system, however. He also offers a dynamic vision of a transformed society (see 4: 1-4). This is a picture of liberated hope: there is another way to live which does recognise the rights and essential value of all people.

"Love Kindness"

This is continuous with doing justice. God's love of justice moved God to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but it is stressed that love of the people went hand-in-hand with a desire for justice (see Deuteronomy 7: 7ff).

"Kindness" is a word loaded with meaning: *hesed*, often translated "steadfast love", is probably the attribute most consistently applied to God in God's attitude towards the covenant people. It is only used of relationships that have an element of covenant in them (husband/wife, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, outstanding friendships, etc). It describes an attitude of love which involves a will to maintain the relationship, and work for the health of that relationship, no matter what. In other words, a tenacious love.

To love kindness is to promote certain attitudes in our communities:

Making and keeping commitments

Coupled with "doing justice", "loving kindness" is a call to be present to people in need in committed, ongoing ways. For people concerned in faith and ministry formation, some central issues of faith crop up under this heading: belief & doubt, promise & betrayal, power & powerlessness, belonging & exclusion, suffering & hope.

The prophetic call to act in a God-like manner (that is, with hesed, covenant love) reminds us that people are vulnerable, and hope is a fragile thing. To witness to God's care for justice is to offer hope, but to do so without considering the fragility of persons is a dangerous undertaking.

Loving tenderly and steadfastly is recognising the capacity of another person to be wounded, to suffer, to be dependent upon relationship with others. We cannot invite people out on the journey of faith and formation only to abandon them. Luke stresses this aspect of 'loving kindness' in his version of the parable of the barren fig tree. Matthew and Mark show Jesus cursing the fig tree and moving on. Luke shifts the focus of the story to a parable told by Jesus, in which the gardener intercedes for the tree and promises to give it intensive, continuing care. To be the community of God, Luke is telling his listeners, is to commit oneself to tenacious love.

Creating a hope-filled community

A community which practices loving kindness is one which can give a voice to the marginalised of society, can dare to move out on a journey together, but can also allow the pain of transformation to be present continuously within that community. The question that seemed to trouble the Lukan community, "Who is my neighbour?", continues to trouble us for the same reasons: to identify neighbour is to identify need, which is to identify areas of ongoing commitment, which is to allow transformation to disrupt our community. Hesed is also often translated as "tenderness". To love tenderly is to allow growing space: a "holding environment" that is present in support but allows space for awkwardness and ungainliness in growth (Ps 103: "As a parent is tender to the children, so the Holy One is tender ... for God knows our frame and remembers that we are dust."). The parable of the Good Samaritan follows immediately after the question "Who is my neighbour?". Luke fleshes out the admonition to love kindness with an example of how this might actually work in the community: by showing practical compassion, even to one's enemy.

"Walk Humbly with your God"

Luke's concern for love of God as well as neighbour is the first response to the question, "What is written in the law?". Micah recognises this when he adds to the call for justice and love, the requirement to "walk humbly with your God". Read superficially, this appears to be the only clause that deals with our relationship with God (the other two referring to interpersonal relationships). In fact, all three refer to our relationship with God and with other people. In God's covenant community, each reflect and interact with the other. Micah's three points are not a checklist to be ticked off one by one, but a whole picture.

Humble walking

This is a beautifully ambiguous phrase. The usual, immediate reading is that in the presence of God, the all-powerful, we can only adopt an attitude of humility. This is certainly true, but the rich ambiguity of the Hebrew can have alternative nuances. Another reading could be that God's walk is humble, therefore if we wish to model ourselves on God, our walk must also be humble. (This notion sends us back into concern with 'communities of tenderness': exploration of regard and respect for others). An emphasis on following God's own humble walk provides a check to the 'spiritual muscle-flexing' that can go on when people feel they have special access to the Spirit!

The verb 'walk' implies decision: to step out and to choose travelling companions. The Old Testament picture of living in God's presence is always active, and the gospel writers continue to see discipleship in this way (e.g. Mark's emphasis on following 'on the way', Luke's 'taking up one's cross daily').

With your God

The prophets constantly point out that without constant reference to the struggle to find who & where God is in our shifting circumstances, we fall into the danger of gradually realigning ourselves with something that is less than God, even if we still call it "God". This comes under the heading of 'idolatry' in the prophetic vocabulary. For Micah, walking with God meant recognising God's concern with justice. This concern should be taught to the people by leaders who have taken the time to learn God's character, from God's past involvement with Israel.

Luke's emphasis on persistent prayer indicates that he picks up the importance of walking with God. Following in the path of the prophets, he stresses that walking with God means paying attention to the power of God within oneself, as well as in the world. Losing the sense of God within is denounced as 'the yeast of the Pharisees' (cf. 11: 37-52; 12: 1). Failing to see the quiet power of God in the world is to miss the point of the parables of the Kingdom of God.

Idolatry takes different forms for us (for example: God as policeman, as the epitome of everything male, as the parental hangover, the grandfatherly figure, the managing director, the puppeteer, the fuzzy personal pocket-warmer, etc). All of these images are idolatrous because they are so much less than the reality of God. These kinds of alternative gods present alternative social systems, which do not necessarily serve the cause of justice and love, as the prophets pointed out. Therefore, a choice for an image of God is also a choice for a social system.

What Luke 'read there' was and is a coherent picture of a God who has always been seen in human history as vitally concerned with justice and love. Luke sets this up as his agenda, too, when he opens Jesus' public ministry with the reading from Isaiah, a passage that spells out in more detail what Micah 6: 8 paints with a broad brush. Our humble walk with God continues to use Luke's Gospel as well as the Scriptures which Luke held in such regard, as a major reference point in discerning the character of God, and hence our character as the people of God.