

JUST EVANGELISATION

“You have already been told what is right and what Yahweh wants of you. Only this, that you act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

This text from the Prophet Micah is very well known. It succinctly and beautifully summarises the core of the message of the Old Testament prophets. Volumes have been written on its component parts in their own right: justice - doing what is right; tender love, mercy or loyal love as sometimes translated; and a humble walk with God, the word ‘your’ stressing the interpersonal nature of this encounter. I cannot add much to each component taken separately here. However, Micah brings them into close association with each other. It is my intention to make some comments on their relation to each other and link these to the context of evangelisation.

Justice and Evangelisation

Is work for justice part of evangelisation? Some see proclamation of Jesus and invitation to personal faith in Jesus as quite distinct from work for justice. The separation of the two is sometimes advocated by keen supporters of both activities. Is it a bolt on, an optional extra, something only secondary or preparatory to the proclamation of the Gospel? For some it is less spiritual, more secular, and less central to religion and the Gospel. Not so, for Micah and the other prophets. This text links it with tender love and walking with God and the text is placed within passages that insist that our relationship with God and also our prayers, liturgy and worship are unacceptable to God if not accompanied by righteous just living. Neither must love be partial or cold. These elements went hand in hand for Jesus too. His manifesto given at Nazareth stresses the restoration of justice and care for the poor (Luke 4:16-20). The Beatitudes – seen as a summary of the Gospel – highlight the need to hunger and thirst for justice (Matthew 5:7).

Damien Byrne, Dominican, has written: “If we accept that preaching justice and peace is an integral part of Gospel, then it is part of evangelisation and it is to be preached or the Gospel is sold short and weakened. It must also be lived since we preach by our actions.” This all makes me recall the words of Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel and if necessary use words.” The Gospel was never intended to be purely personal, interior or other worldly. It has elements of all these but also their counter points too. The Gospel is a total package, touching everything and bringing wholeness. Preaching the Gospel selectively can very easily go hand in hand with hearing and living the Gospel selectively. This needs to be guarded against. The parts of the Gospel connect and fuller life, blessing and evangelisation flow from a full joined up grasp and application of it

Pope Paul VI, amongst others, pointed towards interesting links between these themes. “There is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.” Forgiveness is part of a merciful tender love. We can add that it is humility and honesty about us and before God that brings forgiveness and inner peace. We thus have a dynamic movement from inner to outer peace passing through humility, tender love and justice. These are, of course, the elements brought together by Micah. This dynamic can move in either direction, bringing people from a sense of God to a care for social justice and vice versa. It moves between that which is most interior and personal and that which embraces all people and indeed all of creation. It

speaks of a wholeness, integration, integrity and transparency. It speaks of and proclaims God.

Justice and Tender Love

Love of God and love of neighbour go hand in hand. They form the two legs on which our pilgrimage through life takes place. They are not in conflict but co-operate. Love of neighbour and justice also go hand in hand, or step by step, each feeding and building the other.

It is important –vital - to bring a tender love to work for justice. How much better will we understand and respond to others when we have taken time to listen to them, to get alongside them, to walk a mile in their shoes. From this is born empathy, solidarity, compassion and a gentle but resolute determination to put things right for others, for all. Certainly work for justice is about social, economic and political factors but it cannot be reduced to these. Analysis and solutions determined only at these levels will fall short and often disappoint and dry up their advocates too. The Gospel is not an ideology, abstract, impersonal and cold. It can be seen as accepting the vulnerable and building links and relationship and indeed covenant with them. It is about breaking down walls so there are no more outsiders, but bonds of practical love with dignity and justice for all. Why ultimately is the Gospel all this? Because of the Incarnation: God became human, made himself vulnerable, came alongside us in our poverty, loved us tenderly and mercifully, served us, suffered to overcome all that oppresses us and brought us all into a new covenant relationship with God and each other. We in turn are to be caught up in extending this Divine mission, called to let it work through us.

Justice and a Humble Walk with God

‘Walking humbly with your God’ implies closeness and also a willingness to be changed. It implies an attentiveness, openness, a sense of listening and patience. These are all characteristics we need in prayer and before the Word of God in the different ways this is spoken to us. But such attitudes should also effect how we walk with the poor and unjustly treated. There is a link between how we walk and sit with God, with the Word and with the poor. We expect to be changed by being with God and his Word. We also need to be willing to be changed by being with the poor. Are we open to this? Are we humble enough see God in the poor and unjustly treated, to hear God speaking to us through them (cf Matthew 25:31-46). Are we willing to respond? To change our lives – and what is unjust in them? To act with and for them against injustice? God and his Word enrich our encounter with the poor but they also enrich our encounter with God. God identifies himself with the poor and suffering in a special way, God is present in them. Thus we are evangelised by our encounter with them, transformed and made just by our work with them. We receive as well as give, pilgrims together, brothers and sisters, blessing each other. This is not about condescension on our part. It requires a humble if resolute heart!

Justice and God

Micah takes up the theme of social justice throughout his book. There is no true religion, no true worship without it. Certainly we have to do our part, yet Micah knows that it is only possible with God and coming from God (e.g. Micah 7:7-20). Likewise we too need to look to God and his grace, to pray, to yearn for God’s coming, to point to the fullness of justice and tender love that only God can bring. In this perspective, each small act of love, each attempt at justice takes on lasting value. In this, however busy and engaged we are, however impossible the task seems, we also witness to God, looking to him and pointing others to find in him the inspiration, heart, energy and goal of their work and thirst for justice.

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