

God Will Be Our King

The Book of Micah

The Birth of the King

Micah 4:1 – 5:15

Introduction: The Limitations of President Obama

I was wondering how to help us enter into the Christmas season. What does Jesus' birth mean for us and for the world? In order to not be trite, I'm going to look at the political dimension of Jesus' birth. Less than one year ago, Barack Obama took the office of President. Although not all Americans shared the same stance as Obama did on all issues, it was fair to say that many people hoped that change would come. For me personally, my hopes were high. I have never been into reading the news and following politics as much as I've been since Obama took office. And on the whole I still like Obama. But, he is not the Messiah. I've been disappointed on a few things. Which things is a question that is not relevant to the point I'm making here, though of course we can talk later about it. And perhaps Obama is doing the best any human being can do given the circumstances. But, even if that is so, it drives home even more deeply the point that he is not the Messiah.

For example, in September 2009, former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan told the BBC, "The [economic] crisis will happen again... They [financial crises] are all different, but they have one fundamental source," he said. "That is the unquenchable capability of human beings when confronted with long periods of prosperity to presume that it will continue." Speaking a year after the collapse of US investment bank Lehman Brothers, which was followed by a worldwide financial crisis and global recession, Mr Greenspan described the behaviour as "human nature". He said the current crisis was triggered by the trade in US sub-prime mortgages - home loans given to people with bad credit histories - but he added that any factor could have been the catalyst. If it were not the problem of these toxic debts, "something sooner or later would have emerged", Mr Greenspan said. "It's human nature, unless somebody can find a way to change human nature, we will have more crises and none of them will look like this because no two crises have anything in common, except human nature."

I find that sobering. That means that whether or not Obama succeeds in reforming Wall Street is a secondary issue. He cannot change human nature. He is not the Messiah. But Jesus is. And this is what we remember this Christmas. We remember the birth of the One who can change human nature itself. And we remember the mission he shares with us: to call the world to be transformed by Jesus as we ourselves are being transformed by him.

Context of Micah

I'd like us to look at the book of Micah. We're going to reflect on Micah's prediction of the birth of the Messiah in Micah 5:2. This is a famous verse. Matthew quotes from it in his Gospel when Jesus is born. But I want to look at Micah more broadly to get a sense for why he, even though King Hezekiah was a very good king, hoped for an even greater king – the Messiah.

Micah's context was a bit like ours: a pretty good king – Hezekiah – and overwhelming political and social problems. Micah had seen the Assyrian army march through his backyard. In Micah 1:1, he introduces his prophetic word with the classic introduction: 'The word of the LORD which came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.' That is the who, what, when, and why. He was writing primarily about the two capital cities – Samaria in Northern Israel, and Jerusalem in Southern Judah. These were the days of the divided kingdom.

These were the problems he saw:

- Monopolizing real estate and making people homeless: ^{2:1} Woe to those who scheme iniquity, Who work out evil on their beds! When morning comes, they do it, For it is in the power of their hands. ² They covet fields and then seize them, And houses, and take them away. They rob a man and his house, A man and his inheritance...

- Exploiting the weak: ^{2:8} Recently My people have arisen as an enemy-- You strip the robe off the garment From unsuspecting passers-by, From those returned from war. ⁹ The women of My people you evict, Each one from her pleasant house. From her children you take My splendor forever...
- Political corruption: ^{3:1} And I said, 'Hear now, heads of Jacob And rulers of the house of Israel. Is it not for you to know justice?' ² You who hate good and love evil, Who tear off their skin from them And their flesh from their bones, ³ Who eat the flesh of my people, Strip off their skin from them, Break their bones And chop them up as for the pot And as meat in a kettle.'
- Abuse of power and accepting bribes: ^{3:11a} Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe,
- Spiritual corruption: ^{3:11b} Her priests instruct for a price And her prophets divine for money.

Your rulers are unjust. Your religious leaders are motivated not by truth and the love of God but by money. Your official interpreters – the media reporters – lie. So, as a result, the capital city Jerusalem will fall: ^{3:12} 'Therefore, on account of you, Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, And the mountain of the temple will become high places of a forest.' If there is no leadership, God will make it apparent that there is no leadership.

But God will restore the capital when the Messiah comes:

^{4:1} And it will come about in the last days
That the mountain of the house of the LORD
Will be established as the chief of the mountains.
It will be raised above the hills,
And the peoples will stream to it.
² Many nations will come and say,
'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD
And to the house of the God of Jacob,
That He may teach us about His ways
And that we may walk in His paths.'
For from Zion will go forth the law,
Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
³ And He will judge between many peoples
And render decisions for mighty, distant nations.
Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
And never again will they train for war.
⁴ Each of them will sit under his vine
And under his fig tree,
With no one to make them afraid,
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
⁵ Though all the peoples walk
Each in the name of his god,
As for us, we will walk
In the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.
⁶ 'In that day,' declares the LORD,
'I will assemble the lame
And gather the outcasts,
Even those whom I have afflicted.
⁷ I will make the lame a remnant
And the outcasts a strong nation,
And the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion
From now on and forever.

But unfortunately before that beautiful day comes, Israel will go to Babylon in exile (Mic.4:8 – 13). It will get worse before it gets better. There will be another crash, because Israel's human nature hadn't been changed yet, not before Jesus. But it will get better. That is the hope Micah holds out. It's in that context that he looks forward to the birth of the true and final king.

The True and Final King

First, Micah sees that the current king, Hezekiah, will fail. ^{5:1} Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; They have laid siege against us; With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek.

In Micah 5:2, Micah then looks towards the birth of the true and final king:

² But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.'

³ Therefore He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.

⁴ And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.

Why Bethlehem? There is some good discussion about whether Bethlehem was a town or a clan or both. But in either case, Bethlehem produced great kings for Israel. It's like how Abraham Lincoln came from Illinois, and Barack Obama comes from Illinois, so perhaps another great President yet to come will be from Illinois. Bethlehem has that kind of meaning. King David was born in Bethlehem the city. King Hezekiah was also born in Bethlehem. There must have been a part of Micah that initially hoped that Hezekiah would be this king: the one who would kick out the Assyrians and be the one to change Israel at last. But no. Hezekiah, as good a king as he was, couldn't solve that problem. The problem was much bigger and much deeper than what Hezekiah could do. So Micah looks ahead to someone else, who will also come from Bethlehem.

That is what we must do now. Regardless of who is President and even how good of a job that individual does, we must look to Jesus and we must announce him like Micah does. No one can change human nature but Jesus. Here is where we get to the meaning of Jesus' birth. At his conception and birth, the eternal Son of God took humanity onto himself in order to radically change it. That is why when we read in Luke about Jesus growing up, it says that Jesus 'beat his way forward as with blows' (Lk.2:52, proektomen).

Illus: The Frodo story in *The Lord of the Rings* gives us some insight into Jesus. Frodo carried the Ring of Power. The Dark Lord Sauron had put his soul into that Ring. And as soon as Frodo took the Ring to destroy it, the Ring started to influence him. It made him paranoid. It made him put himself in danger. It tried to control him when the Nazgul were close so that Frodo would just give himself to them. That's a lot like Jesus wearing our fallen, self-centered humanity, our *ontology*. He struggled against that thing, and Jesus forced it to align with the love of God, moment by moment, day by day. But Jesus couldn't put it down or give it to someone else, as if it were a Ring. He couldn't say, 'Boy, I really need a break!' It was *part of him*. And he needed to destroy it, just like Frodo needed to destroy the Ring. But Frodo failed where Jesus succeeded. Jesus took his own self-centered humanity and cast it into its doom. He crucified it. So that when Jesus was resurrected as a fresh, new kind of human being, he was a God-drenched, God-soaked human being who has no internal resistance to the love of God. Now, when Jesus shares the Spirit of his new God-drenched humanity with us, he draws us Spiritually into his own death and resurrection, so that our self-centeredness would die with him, so that we would rise with him new!

Every other way of framing the issue of evil is shallow. It's not that evangelism and discipleship will solve all the world's problems; it is not triumphalism. There will always be our own struggle with sin, as well as people who reject Jesus. But it is real hope. Not triumphalism, but real hope. And the political world is still important as part of our engagement with the world. But for those who believe that evil is located outside human beings, as if it were in structures and laws alone, we must say NO. It is within us. That is why Jesus came as a human being, to cleanse his humanity so give us his new humanity. That is why he did not come as a set of laws to be implemented. He came as a human to cleanse that humanity from within and bend human nature back to what it was meant to be: drenched with the love of God.

Illus: So we have windows of insight into that time when Jesus will heal us and heal the world in fullness. For example, did you know about the soccer game that broke out between Germans, British, and French soldiers in the trenches of World War I? This is the story behind the poem *Silent Night*, by Stanley Weintraub – the story of Christmas Eve, 1914, on the World War I battlefield in Flanders. As the German, British, and French troops facing each other were settling in for the night, a young German soldier began to sing “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.” Others joined in. When they had finished, the British and French responded with other Christmas carols. Eventually, the men from both sides left their trenches and met in the middle. They shook hands, exchanged gifts, and shared pictures of their families. Informal soccer games began in what had been “no-man’s-land.” And a joint service was held to bury the dead of both sides. The generals, of course, were not pleased with these events; they ordered the gunfire back on. But, following that magical night the men on both sides spent a few days simply firing aimlessly into the sky. Then the war was back in earnest and continued for three more bloody years. Yet the story of that Christmas Eve lingered - a night when the angels really did sing of peace on earth. Folksinger John McCutcheon wrote a song about that night in Belgium, titled “Christmas in the Trenches,” from the viewpoint of a young British soldier. Several poignant verses are:

“The next they sang was ‘Stille Nacht,’ ‘Tis ‘Silent Night’,” says I.
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky
“There’s someone coming towards us!” the front line sentry cried
All sights were fixed on one lone figure coming from their side
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright
As he bravely strode unarmed into the night.

Soon one by one on either side walked into No Man’s land
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave ‘em hell.
We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home
These sons and fathers far away from families of their own
Young Sanders played his squeeze box and they had a violin
This curious and unlikely band of men.

Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night
“Whose family have I fixed within my sights?”
‘Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung
For the walls they’d kept between us to exact the work of war
Had been crumbled and were gone for evermore.”

Hope in Jesus is not triumphalism, but it is real hope, because there is a reality of a new humanity that has come because of his birth, life, death, and resurrection.

And for those who believe that we just sit around and wait for heaven, we must say that that is not the case either. We are called to constantly advance the kingdom of Jesus throughout the whole world. Look at 5:4, ‘And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth.’ Micah then has a vision of what the world will be like under the reign of the Messiah. He uses the idea of, ‘What if the Assyrian comes back to trample on us?’ as a question. The language is both military and not military. For instance, the question, ‘What if the Assyrian comes back?’ is answered with, ‘We will raise again him seven *shepherds*.’ Really? Seven *shepherds*?

⁵ This One will be our peace.
When the Assyrian invades our land,
When he tramples on our citadels,
Then we will raise against him
Seven shepherds and eight leaders of men.
⁶ They will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword,
The land of Nimrod at its entrances;
And He will deliver us from the Assyrian
When he attacks our land
And when he tramples our territory.

Micah describes the Messiah being victorious over the Assyrians (5:5 – 6) and the people of the Messiah moving in confidence among the nations (5:7 – 9). As they move in confidence, the Lord cuts off idol worship, sorcery, violence, and militarism.

⁷ Then the remnant of Jacob
Will be among many peoples
Like dew from the LORD,
Like showers on vegetation
Which do not wait for man
Or delay for the sons of men.

⁸ The remnant of Jacob
Will be among the nations,
Among many peoples
Like a lion among the beasts of the forest,
Like a young lion among flocks of sheep,
Which, if he passes through,
Tramples down and tears,
And there is none to rescue.

⁹ Your hand will be lifted up against your adversaries,
And all your enemies will be cut off.

¹⁰ It will be in that day,' declares the LORD,
That I will cut off your horses from among you
And destroy your chariots.

¹¹ I will also cut off the cities of your land
And tear down all your fortifications.

¹² I will cut off sorceries from your hand,
And you will have fortune-tellers no more.

¹³ I will cut off your carved images
And your sacred pillars from among you,
So that you will no longer bow down
To the work of your hands.

¹⁴ I will root out your Asherim from among you
And destroy your cities.

¹⁵ And I will execute vengeance in anger and wrath
On the nations which have not obeyed.'

I believe that this describes the ultimate victory of Jesus over human evil in the end, but it is glimpsed when we look at the mission of the church among the nations, as we move confidently among the nations to proclaim the victory of Jesus that will be revealed in fullness later. There is a relationship between the proclamation of the church of Jesus' victory and the full revelation of that victory.

Now unfortunately for Micah and for Israel, the Assyrians came again before Jesus did. In 721 BC, they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (though not the Southern Kingdom of Judah). But when Jesus came, he first brought healing and light to the area that was conquered by the Assyrians: the Galilee area. And then, as he was victorious over human evil in himself, and shared the Spirit of his resurrected, new humanity with the world through his people, he met the Assyrians again. Jesus did send them shepherds. And for those who bowed to him, he did remove their idolatry.

Illus: I'm speaking of the Assyrian Church of the East. These people became the greatest Christian missionaries the world has ever known. They went to India and China perhaps in the 1st century, Vietnam by the 2nd century, Japan before the 5th century. By the year 800, there were more Christians east of Damascus than there were west of Damascus. They lived and proclaimed Christ under Persian rule, Arab Muslim rule, and Mongolian rule. And Jesus, through their presence, has transformed people. In India, in the state of Kerala, the transformation is huge. If Kerala were its own country, it would rank in the top 10 countries in UN metrics of social health: the gap between rich and poor is low, infant mortality is low, the rights of women are high, literacy is high. That's the difference Jesus makes.

So let us also enter into this season of Christmas remembering the significance of Jesus' birth. From the standpoint of Micah, Isaiah, and the other prophets, this is what Jesus' birth means. It means the beginning of a new humanity in Jesus, and the mission of Jesus' people to move confidently among the nations to live out and proclaim Jesus' victory among the nations.