

We have read as our Old Testament Lesson that passage from Micah that we will be reading at our Carol Service this evening. Micah was writing in the closing years of the 8th century BC. The Northern Kingdom of Judah had been over run, the Kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem was expected to follow suit. Micah saw all this in terms of God's judgement on a people who had betrayed their divine call. This passage, with its reference to 'Bethlehem of Ephrathah, one of the little clans of Judah', recalls the very beginnings of the monarchy, the anointing of David. The prophet is speaking of new beginnings, a fresh start for a people, for a kingdom that has brought itself to the edge of destruction.

It is out of the littleness of Ephrathah, of Bethlehem that this new beginning, this restored Davidic line will arise. It is one of those stories of new beginnings that we see in the Bible. There is something almost reminiscent of the new start in creation that we see in the story of the Flood. Out of the destruction wrought by the Flood, a new start is made through the littleness of one family, the family of Noah. In the time of Micah, the people of Judah have been brought to the edge of destruction. Even in the midst of the devastation the prophet speaks of new beginnings, new hope.

from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days. *Micah 5:2*

Early followers of Jesus, as they reflected on his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection, came to see in texts such as these pointers to their own understanding of Jesus and his place in salvation history.

I come back to the littleness, the seeming insignificance of this place, the seeming insignificance of Nazareth, the place where Jesus was to grown up, and set it all in the context of the song of Mary, the Magnificat, a song of praise and gratitude to God when she goes to meet with her cousin Elizabeth that we have used in our service today.

The Magnificat may be familiar, may be traditional, but if you read it closely, it is quite radical in its content as it speaks of the powerful being brought low and the humble lifted up, the hungry being filled and the rich being sent empty handed away. It is a song of reversal; of the little, the insignificant finding favour with God.

It all fits in with the future proclamation of the child who leapt in Elizabeth's womb as her cousin Mary came into her home. Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist, was to call his generation to repentance. In the Gospel reading appointed for last week, he was to have harsh words for the rich and powerful in both the political and religious establishment of his day.

Also, as we read last week, he was to call his hearers to a new way of living in the world. The one with two tunics was to give to those who had none; the tax collector was to forgo his customary payment on the side; the soldier was to refrain from his customary practices of oppression and extortion of the local population.

This coming week our hearts and minds begin to turn towards Bethlehem, to the birth of a child born to a peasant girl, in a small town, in a borrowed room.

I suppose the images of Christmas, Joseph, Mary, shepherds, wise men gathered around the crib in the warm glow of lamp and candlelight, quite understandably appeal to us but they are far from being the whole story of Christmas. For behind the story of Christmas is the God of the Magnificat, the God of new beginnings, the one who brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up the humble; the one who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty handed away.

In the Incarnation, this God of the Magnificat, comes among us in the child of Bethlehem, comes among us to call us to a new way of living before God. And so we prepare to celebrate the coming of him who declared that ‘the first shall be last and the last’; the one who, as his disciples bickered among themselves as to who was going to be the greatest among them, placed a child in their midst, declaring that ‘except you become as a little child, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.’

He was the one, who on the night of the Last Supper, laid aside his coat, taking on the task of the least of the least of the household servants, washing the feet of his disciples:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.