

## Sermon given by Garth Raybould on 20 December 2009

### Micah 5.2-5a and Luke 1.39-45

“How happy is she who has had faith that the Lord’s promise would be fulfilled.”

Have you ever had that experience where you look back over part of your life and realise that something that seemed puzzling at the time fits into a pattern? Maybe something that was disappointing turns out to have been for the best? We have the benefit of hindsight. We see the bigger picture when we look back.

Just a small example. Jean and I were at Aberystwyth University. We were set to get married in July of the year when she finished her teacher training. I still had 2½ years to go as a research student, so Jean really wanted to find a teaching post within a few miles of Aberystwyth. This was in the days when you could teach in Wales without necessarily being a Welsh speaker. (Jean did actually have lessons in conversational Welsh – she learned to say “Mae gwely yn y gegin”, which means “the bed is in the kitchen” – not a good basis for teaching English through the medium of Welsh.) Anyway, although she was trained as an English teacher she got so desperate to stay close to me that she applied for a history post at the secondary school in Aberaeron, which was near to Aberystwyth, and indeed still is. She had an interview. She didn’t get the job, but a few days later her professor sent for her and told her the headmaster of Lampeter secondary school had been on the phone asking for an English teacher. To cut a short story even shorter she did get that job. It turned out later that the Lampeter headmaster had told the Aberaeron headmaster he was after an English teacher and did he know any good candidates? So what seemed a futile application led to a whole career. When you look back on it. There have been some other examples and maybe you’ve all had similar experiences. Though I bet you never learned to say “Mae gwely yn y gegin.”

Micah’s prophecy, which Andy read to us, is a bit like that. When we who know about Jesus Christ look back at the prophecy we can see how it speaks of the coming of Jesus. That’s true of a lot of the writings of the Old Testament prophets. But what did it mean to the people of 2½ thousand years ago, when it was first written? Did they know what it was about? Did Micah himself know what it was about?

Try to imagine you’re reading Micah’s words 500 years before the birth of Jesus. All you know is that Israel is constantly praying for a strong leader, someone who will lead them once and for all to victory over all the warring neighbours who want their land. Someone they call the Messiah – the saviour.

This is probably how you would understand these few verses of Micah:

Out of you, Bethlehem: Bethlehem is the city where King David was born so perhaps it’s natural to expect the Messiah to come from there. (Ephratah was an ancient name of Bethlehem.)

Will come a ruler: Obviously, this is the expected military king who will lead Israel to final victory over the surrounding nations.

Whose origins are from ancient times:

A puzzler, this one – perhaps it means the king will be someone old and experienced in strategy and tactics.

Israel will be abandoned until she who is in labour gives birth:

Hmm, even more puzzling. Perhaps it means Israel will carry on being oppressed by foreigners, suffering pain like a woman in labour, until the liberator comes and brings relief.

The rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites:

The tribes who have been captured and taken away to be slaves in the

neighbouring countries will return to Judaea.

He will shepherd his flock: This will be a generous and caring king – he'll be strong enough to protect his people from the aggressor states – he'll give them security and enable them to get on with the ordinary business of living.

His greatness will reach the ends of the earth:

Again, because of this leader's strength he will be feared by every nation on the earth.

And he will be their peace: They will be able to live securely, without fear of attack.

That's what we might call the pre-Jesus interpretation. Let's see what we make of the same passage now we know about Jesus.

Out of you, Bethlehem: Where Jesus was born.

Will come a ruler: Christ the King.

Whose origins are from ancient times:

Jesus was one with God from the beginning of time.

Israel will be abandoned: There was no word from God, no prophecy, for 400 years until Jesus came.

Until she who is in labour gives birth:

This is obviously Mary giving birth to Jesus – although Elizabeth's baby John was also a new prophet and his birth was quite newsworthy.

The rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites:

The people of Israel will turn back to God – and also the gentile races become part of the new Israel by accepting Jesus.

He will shepherd his flock: Jesus the Good Shepherd. Also translated as "He will feed his flock", which reminds us that Jesus called himself the Bread of Life. It's interesting that the name Bethlehem means "house of bread".

His greatness will reach the ends of the earth:

The Gospel, the good news about Jesus, has spread throughout the whole world.

And he will be their peace: Through the grace of Jesus, men and women can know peace within themselves and amongst each other – true peace that comes through the Holy Spirit, not just the absence of war.

So that's the post-Jesus interpretation, the Christian perspective on the prophecy of Micah. We can see the bigger picture. Scripture that might have meant not very much to 5th century BC Israelites, we can see to have been fulfilled in Jesus.

If you saw the Village Nativity you'll know that a wonderful thing happened. The narrator was saying "And a star rose and moved across the sky", and just at that moment a small aeroplane turned and caught the sun, and moved like a star across the sky behind where the stable was. Everybody said "There it is!" The pilot of that plane probably thought he or she could see a bigger picture than we could see on the ground, but in fact he couldn't see that just at that moment his aircraft was part of our bigger picture – he had no idea of the part he was playing. Who can say that God didn't guide that pilot on that path just at that time? Who can say that God didn't direct Micah

to write those words even though he might not have understood then himself?

And Mary – how much did she understand? How much did she understand when her baby was born? How much did she understand when he died? Perhaps she couldn't know what we know now, but she was blessed, and she knew that much. In the words of Elizabeth, she was blessed because she had faith that the Lord's promise would be fulfilled. She knew God had a bigger picture that she couldn't see, and she trusted him, right through the torment at the end of her son's life.

Today, we can see that the Old Testament wasn't a completed work – it was a work in progress. The same applies today. The Bible still isn't a completed work – it's a work of progressive revelation and God is still revealing himself in new ways. We have a duty to use our minds – our God-given reason – to discern what he is saying to us today, and not just to treat the Bible as a book of fixed rules. Some people actually refer to the Bible as the rule book. It's not. The key to it is in the two laws that Jesus himself said were the most important – love God, love your neighbour as yourself. Love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness. Signs of weakness? No It takes greater strength to live by those precepts than by condemnation and vengeance.

We seem to hear a lot these days about the Bible being used to condemn people who have a different view of things, whose behaviour is “non-biblical” – they might be non-believers, or followers of other faiths; most often it seems to be other Christians. A grown-up, confident church will turn away from condemnation and concentrate on feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, sheltering the homeless, healing the wounded – because that's what Jesus told us to do and that's how his gospel will spread. It's for us to live by love, and to trust God to take care of the bigger picture.

Well, this time next week we'll be saying it's all over for another year. Let's see Christmas not as an end but a beginning. See the Nativity as part of God's bigger picture – not just a sentimental story but the start of Christ's reign.

Let's pray that the child in the manger will come again as King to rule our hearts and our lives, to bring peace to us and to the world.