

Sunday 2 February 2020

A sermon preached by the Moderator of the Uniting Church, Revd Denise Liersch, at St Paul's Cathedral at the Evensong for the Opening of the Legal Year.

Readings: [Micah 7.14-20](#), [Romans 2.1-16](#)

I am a novice here. I didn't know what this 'Opening of the Legal Year' was really about even a year ago. And so it was a bit of a challenge, to say the least, when I was asked if I would be involved this year – and then asked to preach. I asked myself: What is this about? What do people come for? What are they hoping to take part in; what are they hoping to hear? What is it that we are doing here? I was asked by one person: is it about receiving a blessing for the year's work?

Who is the Church to give a blessing or to speak of good and right conduct to those who practice the law, who work professionally to bring justice in our land?

The Church falls short, not least seen in our failures of the past, so foremost in the minds of so many. We failed to protect vulnerable children placed into the Church's care: vulnerable children who had a right to expect they would receive love and care, and instead were abused and neglected.

But it is not the blessing of the *Church* that we are gathered here for.

It is to be reminded, all of us – members of the legal profession and members of the Church, people of faith and people of none – of a calling that comes from beyond ourselves; a high calling which comes to all of us, to be part of the creation of a just society, which promotes equity, which protects the vulnerable, and which upholds the rights of all without partiality, without fear and without prejudice.

We are here to be reminded of our high calling.

You have a calling to be practitioners of justice.

Remember who you are; remember what you are called to.

And so, we look back to the roots of that high calling in our society, going back to ancient texts that are the grounding of the legal profession, to see what they have to say, and what they might remind us of.

In our first reading, we hear from the prophet Micah, who speaks to a people, a society, gone astray.

The prophet writes as if a court case is taking place: where the case of God against the people is being tried. The people's failure to live by the ways God has called them to, is being laid out. They have failed to uphold standards of justice and peace and mercy. There are those who covet the property of others and use their power unjustly to seize it; they oppress householders; they wipe out the inheritances of ordinary people; they drive out poor women from their homes, leaving them and their children homeless; they seem content with a massive gap between rich and poor; bribery and corruption is rife.

And alternately, Micah accuses, and then shows a way of hope for restoration; a hope that lies in the willingness of God to show mercy, to clear the way for the people to change their ways and have their relationships with each other and God restored.

But it is no easy way out. It is no cheap forgiveness. They can't just say a few prayers, spend a day or two taking part in pious rituals, or say how sorry they are. That alone does not get to the crux of things.

No, Micah tells them, change is needed, a whole different way of living is required, a different way of treating each other.

And we hear it in the verse that is probably one of the best-known verses in the ancient Hebrew texts: "You know what is good! What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

What is offered is an ever-open door of mercy, for the people to change their ways, to remember their high calling, and to follow it – so that relationships of justice and equity might be restored – with each other and with God. A community that displays justice and mercy is to be created and upheld.

The justice of which Micah speaks is not simply about punishment of individuals for individual wrongdoing. It is about restoration of a community marked by justice and equity; marked by there being none who fall through the cracks; a society marked by how well it cares for the most vulnerable, so that *all* are able to live in safety and peace, to earn a living for themselves, to secure a future for their children, and to be free from being taken advantage of by the powerful.

In the times of the ancient writers, the most vulnerable were widows, orphans and foreigners; women, children, the sick and disabled, those living with mental illness, outsiders, and those without citizenship. Not so different today really, is it?

This is our high calling, to be part of what makes for a society based on the values of doing justice, showing kindness, and practicing humility in the way we work and lead our lives – with a particular concern for the most vulnerable, and without partiality or prejudice.

In the passage we heard this evening, the closing passage of the book of Micah, we hear a litany, a prayer, a song, a poem, where the people declare their desire to change their ways, to turn toward this high calling, and for their lives to be aligned with this way of justice.

We are reminded of our high calling to building justice in our land.

And then we heard the song of Mary from the choir, verses of the Magnificat from Luke's gospel, that song of hope for radical justice breaking into our world and a vision of what it might look like: where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled.

We are reminded of our high calling to building justice in our land.

And then we heard a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, where we are reminded that there is no one who is exempt from the law. Neither Jew nor Greek. All are equally subject. "God shows no partiality." Nor should we.

We are reminded not to judge others according to standards we could never fulfil ourselves. We are reminded of our need to practice our work with humility.

And we are reminded to be doers of the law, not just hearers. Justice is not an idea, it is a way of living in which we all take part. We practice justice not just by our rulings and judgements, but by the way we treat each other.

Paul tells us, like Micah, that this imperative comes not from ourselves, but from beyond ourselves – ultimately to the source of life itself – whom people of faith name as God.

Remember your high calling.

Just last week, I asked a legal professional I know and respect: so, is there an understanding, amongst the profession, that the legal profession is a 'vocation', or a 'calling'? Would legal practitioners say something similar to that?

And he spoke about the legal profession being about practising fearless advocacy on behalf of the client, regardless of our own personal interest, even at personal cost.

He spoke about the ultimate duty of the legal professional being to the court and the imperative of justice in the land, and that these are high standards that come from beyond ourselves or our own personal predilections.

A high calling.

So, I ask myself: have I spoken to you anything new, that you didn't already know?

I hope not. I'm sure not.

In the words of the prophet Micah: You know already what is good. What is required? Do justice, love kindness, work and live with humility.

Yet we all need to be reminded. Constantly. Because these are not, generally, the values of our world, which places such importance on gaining personal advantage to get ahead in our careers, being recognised and having status and influence over others, growing our own personal wealth without looking too hard at whose backs it is made on.

Yet these values of justice, mercy, kindness and humility, are the ones we need to live by, if we want to live in a cohesive society of justice and equity for all.

And so, tonight, at this 'Opening of the Legal Year', may you have had the chance to pause for just for a while, to remember, to re-remember, our high calling to building justice in this land.