

EPIPHANY 4 02-02-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Micah 6.1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1.18-31; Matthew 5.1-12

When your boss writes a letter asking you to be on a board or a committee, the prudent thing to do is say 'yes'. When our previous Archbishop asked me, a few years ago, to be his nominee on the Anglican Social Responsibilities Commission, I was a little reluctant- I wasn't sure how I would fit it in with everything else I was doing. But I said a tentative yes and went along to check it out.

Then I discovered that the Archbishop's nominee traditionally takes the role of the Chair- and I wondered what I was letting myself in for! I was the Chair of the commission from 2014 to 2019; I am still a member, and Ian Carter is now the Chair.

Before God called me to parish ministry I was the Coordinator of Anglican Chaplaincy for a number of years, and found myself advocating for chaplains in their roles in hospitals, prisons and aged care organisations.

In that role I visited Christmas Island as the Archbishop's representative; in partnership with the Uniting Church, we had placed a chaplain to the detention centres which at that time housed thousands of asylum seekers. When I came back I was angry and sad and fired up, because I had seen for myself the imprisonment of men, women, and children, and heard their tragic stories as they tried to find a safe place to live.

Let's not forget that there are still people in the Christmas Island Detention Centre: Nades, Priya, and their two little girls- Kopika and Thaurunicaa. Just one family, sharing one bedroom in a huge centre, with 109 staff and costing Australia millions of dollars.

When I heard this week that Australian's returning from China are to be quarantined on Christmas Island I was horrified. Can you imagine taking your little ones to stay in a big prison? Somewhere very hot and humid, with a very small hospital so if anyone does become ill they will have to be flown to the mainland anyway- four hours away.

I think that is why I was asked to be on the commission: God stirred me up and gave me a passion for social justice.

The little section from the prophet Micah that we heard today is rightly famous, because it beautifully sums up so much of what God is on about all through the Bible.

Verse 8 says: 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

The Social Responsibilities Commission- SRC- has chosen this as our vision statement: "To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God."

Our focus areas include advocacy; research; providing resources for parishes; working with formation students; creating relationships with other social justice groups; and mainstreaming social justice- in other words, encouraging the church to remember that this is part of its core business.

Today's gospel reading is the beginning of the collection of the teachings of Jesus that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. How should we read it, as Christians of the 21st century? Can it help us, today's church, with our core business?

Matthew tells us that Jesus went up the mountain, sat down, and began to teach. The writer wants to remind us of Moses, who also went up a mountain to meet with God and came back down with the Ten Commandments.

However, the 'Beatitudes', as these 'blessed are' statements are known, are not commandments.

Jesus was not telling anyone to become poor or mournful or hungry or meek.

He was talking to people who were already poor and often hungry; people who lived under the captivity of the empire, who were oppressed by the soldier's boot (or sandal), suffering robbery and wrongdoing.

These blessings are more like ethics for kingdom-living. These are blessings for people who live in the present and in anticipation of a better future.

For example, Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' We might assume that this refers to people who are mourning for someone who has died; and we do pray that those who are in mourning will find comfort in God's love.

But this is about those who mourn for the state of the world around them, who mourn for the violence and suffering and injustice they see. Jesus would have us look forward to the coming of his kingdom, when suffering will cease to be; and in the meantime, he would have us work and pray and live for peace and the relief of suffering.

What about 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.'? 'Meek' does not mean weak; the Greek word means a combination of gentleness and strength. Blessed are those who, like Jesus, will not simply accept injustice and cruelty and oppression as 'the way things are' and who will do all they can to support those who suffer; but who will not counter violence with violence, either in word or deed.

Living into the spirit of the Beatitudes is something we can all do. It means living with a commitment to simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion.

It means we take seriously our responsibility to our children and grandchildren, to leave them a world that we have tried not to damage beyond repair because we have tried to live simply, and to tell our leaders that we cannot continue to plunder and pollute the earth that sustains us.

It means that we attempt to model a life that does not conform to the norms of society, when those 'norms' contradict our commitment to simplicity, hopefulness and compassion.

It means helping our young ones to understand that God loves them and ALL people very much, just as God loves all of creation and expects us to care for it. It means we will speak thoughtfully, so that children can learn that the language of hate, exclusion, bullying and violence is not acceptable.

As our young people go to school, college, or university this year, let us pray for those with the great responsibility of teaching and guiding them; and let us pray for ourselves, that we will be wise and loving. Most of all, let us pray for all the children of the world, who will inherit whatever we leave behind for them; may we be able to tell them that we have done and will continue to do our best for them.

The Lord be with you.