



# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

**The Church- like Israel - cannot be "like the other nations"**

**Micah 5:1-5 - Luke 1:39-56**

## **Advent 4**

### ***A struggle between God the just Judge and God the Saviour***

The Jewish people at the time of Micah were living in a harsh world, a time of great suffering, humiliation and doubt. One of the prophet's messages was how this suffering and national decline was only going to get worse before relief comes to them. His challenge was how to direct the people to live in the time between judgment (the coming of the Assyrians and the Babylonians) and salvation (the time when a son of David would once again sit on the throne in Jerusalem). The cornerstone on which the future of Jerusalem – and indeed the whole world – was constructed was hope. It was about persevering in hope despite the obvious darkness abounding in the world in which they struggled.

*Note* the mention on *Bethlehem Ephrathah* here. It was a tiny village, a place of no significance apart from its ties to the family of David. But in noting it Micah is establishing an important spiritual and theological theme: when it comes to the saving works of God, human measurement, worldly ways of assessing power and strength and all human attempts at weighing up size and potential are meaningless. Here we see God choosing the most unlikely candidate as the means by which the divine will is to be carried out. This nothing place is now the focal point for the unfolding of the divine saving will.

### ***This new ruler will be my leader, a servant for me***

This often skipped over comment goes to the heart of what God is doing in creation. God is not concerned about making Israel a great and powerful political entity in the world. Yahweh God is not about finding a new *king* for the nation. In fact, the Hebrew word used here is not *king* but *mosel* (ruler). The nation, if it is ever to live in a covenant relationship with God, needs to have God as their one and only King. They cannot *be like the other nations* as they demanded of Samuel in the time before the appointment of Saul as king of Israel. They are God's people, or they are nothing.

Micah goes on to speak of this *ruler* as a *shepherd*, one who will *feed the flock in the strength of Yahweh*. This is going to happen because of the promise God made to David his servant. The reality the people have to face is the way this future *ruler* will minister in a very different way to the way they have come to expect and even demand. They need to accept how they *require feeding by God*.

But all of that is off into the future. Note the way Micah speaks of the present time being not unlike that of a woman in labour (verse 3). Israel will suffer in the way a mother suffers in giving birth. What keeps her going and enables her to persevere in hope is the child born at the end of it all. Israel too needs to go through a period of *suffering*, not because suffering is good in itself. Their suffering is all about them coming to the realization they need God and that if they want God's grace and power in their lives, then they need to do something about living differently. They must turn their lives around so that once again God is their one and only King. For Micah and the other prophets, *faith* alone can bring an enduring hope. *Faith* here is a spiritual reality permeating every aspect of life or it is not *faith*.

**Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -**

<sup>51</sup> GOD shows strength  
with his arm;  
GOD scatters the  
arrogant in the thoughts  
of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> GOD pulls the mighty  
from their thrones,  
and exalts the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> GOD fills the hungry  
with good things,  
and GOD sends the rich  
away unfulfilled.

## ***Mary – a model for the Church***

What Mary does in this beautiful piece of poetry is take what God has done for her personally and apply it to the whole world, to all *who acknowledge him as God's messiah* (= *all who fear him*). The divine power on display in what is happening is not just for Mary or for Israel. It is for everyone who strives to live under Christ.

**Note the reversal of fortunes:** In her *yes* to God, Mary moves from lowliness to exaltation. This is not about her but about what God can do and is already doing in and through the most unexpected of people, places (Bethlehem) and times. As with Mary, so with us.

Note too the way God responds in *mercy* towards those who risk acknowledging him as Father, who strive to live under God as their one and only King. The world will change when others come to see the great human and social transformations coming about when people place themselves under God and follow the divine will for creation. When they refuse to *live like the other nations* and instead live in the world as children of God, **God** transforms the world around them.

### ***God scatters, pulls down, exalts and fills***

The whole point of this magnificent song is found in Luke's overall Gospel message. We are living in a new time in creation but as it is not possible to keep *new wine in old wineskins*, so it is not possible to live in this new era of salvation in the ways that did or maybe did not work before. New skins are what is being demanded here and Mary is the model chosen by God to exemplify the divine working.

The key to understanding Mary and so our own point of renewal is her response to the angel: *let it be done unto me according to what you want*. She was willing live in faith and hope that tomorrow and through until the very end, her life and all that happened to her and around her was in the loving, caring and merciful hands of the God who was calling her. God would *pull down the arrogant* and *raise up the lowly*. It was her duty to listen, to trust and to obey. She also seems to have understood how these mind-blowing works of God were not about her but about what God was doing for everyone. God is restoring the whole of creation and not just doing something wonderful for Israel.

### ***Mary's "let it be done to me" must be our own mantra for Christmas and for 2019***

There is little doubt that our Church is going through a Micah like experience – a loss of standing in the world, diminishing in size, a watering down of Gospel imperatives in order to better appeal, labouring in a god-diminishing world and an anxiety about any call to transformation of the way we live our faith in a modern and constantly changing social environment. In most places in the West the Church is in decline according to just about every form of measurement. Often our faith communities are just hanging on, hoping to survive but uncertain about how to respond to what God wants of us.

Micah and Luke offer us profound insights into discipleship. We cannot avoid the priority of God's call to *repent* and *to believe* which in biblical language equates to a whole-of-life transformation. It means more than *changing* just a few things on the surface of parish life and of our own personal lives. The Advent message is about what God wants to be doing in us and through us. This requires more time to be listening to God (i.e. prayer + Bible + community worship) and a greater engagement with the *lowly*, those who are *hungry* and those on the margins of our society. The Kingdom proclaimed by the prophets is one moving us out beyond the self to a deeper engagement with God and neighbour.