

1. Our Strong Shepherd

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[0 : 0 0] And now a moment of prayer before we look at Micah chapter 5. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.

Father, we pray that the Lord Christ, who walked the road to Emmaus with his disciples, who opened their eyes, caused their hearts to burn, and sent them out on the road with a message, will do the same to us this evening.

And that this ancient prophet will speak not just into his own time, but into our time, because his words are living, because they are words that you gave to him, not just for his own age, but for every age.

So open our hearts and our minds, in Jesus' name. Amen. So Micah chapter 5, which I'm calling our strong shepherd, taking that from the verses 4 to 6.

I think it was a number of years ago, just before we left Durham, in the Church of England newspaper, there was one of those silly stories that you get around Christmas. The headline was, Dottie Vicar says Santa's axles on his sleeve will turn red hot.

[1 : 1 9] Now, apparently, this guy, whom I rather think the Lord had not over-endowed with a sense of humour, had written in the Church magazine that Santa couldn't possibly travel through the whole world, because the axles on his wheels would turn red hot, having such a distance to travel.

The poor man might have got away with it, but unfortunately for him, one of his congregation was the television personality, Ulrika Johnson, who took it upon herself to tell the media what the vicar had said.

And she said, with a kind of shocked, poutingness, but surely, Christmas is about children, isn't it? What a terrible thing to say to children.

Christmas is about children. Isn't that exactly what many people think? Isn't that exactly what happens at many Christmas services? Toy services, Christmas plays.

Doesn't she look cute? Isn't he sweet, dressed like a shepherd, and so on. Now, the trouble about all that is that it's really, oh, and that doesn't really help us much in the gigantic problems of the world, does it?

[2 : 3 3] We need a message that is more robust, a savior who is strong to save, a shepherd who can truly guide us, and not some kind of sentimental concoction, dreamed up by the media, by a kind of degenerate descent from Charles Dickens, and the Christmas carol.

What we are dealing with at Christmas is not children. We are dealing with one child, who is God Almighty, the mystery of the word made flesh.

And that's what the prophet voices are telling us. In Micah here, the prophet is pointing to a time when a child will be born who will change the whole destiny of the world, indeed the whole destiny of the universe.

Just a very quick word about Micah's times. He prophesies in the 8th century BC, and the background is the brutal Assyrian invasion.

I don't know if any of you have visited the Assyrian rooms in the British Museum. They are absolutely terrifying. When you go into the Assyrian rooms, there's gigantic bull figures with human heads, which are sufficiently intimidating even now, and how they must have intimidated the poor captured nations who were dragged to Nineveh in those days is really terrifying to think about.

[3 : 56] And so when this juggernaut comes against the tiny kingdom of Judah, it seems like curtains. There isn't a contest.

It's rather like Srinrar, sorry Malcolm, taking on Chelsea. There isn't a contest. I could only say that because Newcastle won today for a rare win.

But there isn't a contest. It's a tiny, humiliated nation trying to fight this great juggernaut. And what has the prophet got to say? And how is the situation going to be resolved?

I want to look at this chapter asking three questions. First of all, who is the shepherd? Verse 4, He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.

Now chapter 4 of Micah contains a poem about Zion, which Isaiah the prophet also contains. The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains.

[4 : 58] It shall be lifted above the hills. He looks forward to a time when the city of God would be established as the center of the world and every nation would come to it. Every dominion would bow before it.

But how is this going to happen? King David is long dead and gone. His kingdom is now less than half the size. Who can do this? Who is the shepherd who will guard his people?

And the first thing Micah says is that all earthly power is vulnerable. Chapter 5, verse 1, A siege is laid against us with a rod. They strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.

Read the background to this sometime in 2 Kings 18 and 19 where Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, smashes the cities of Judah and only Jerusalem remains.

And this picture of the judge of Israel being struck on the cheek first and foremost applies to King Hezekiah whom Sennacherib in his own record says, I shut up King Hezekiah like a bird in a cage.

[5 : 58] That was Sennacherib's assessment of it. But surely it points forward to another time in this very city. They shall strike the judge of Israel on the street, on the cheek.

At the time when the Lord Jesus Christ, during his trial for his life, is to be mocked, humiliated, and struck on the cheek. You see, prophecy is always multi-layered.

There's the message for the time, but there's the message for the time of the coming of the king and for all time. So earthly power is vulnerable. Now the city was saved by the intervention of God.

Wonderful story of how the angel of the Lord destroyed the Assyrian army and then Sennacherib goes back and in the temple of his own God, his God is not able to protect him because his own sons assassinate him.

Hezekiah's God, whom he had mocked, protected Hezekiah, but Sennacherib's God failed to protect him. But in a sense that's in the past. What's going to happen the next time?

[6 : 58] Because after all, the next time a great army comes against Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonians, the city is not rescued at the last moment. The city is destroyed.

And then they come back from exile and then the city is to be destroyed again by the Romans in AD 70. But you see, something staggering is being said here.

Not only did God save his people in the past through David, not only is he saving them now through the faith of Hezekiah, but from royal David's city, the tiny village of Bethlehem in the insignificant province of Ephrathah is going to come one whose origin is from old, from ancient days.

Now the word from ancient days is the word elsewhere translated eternity. The king of eternity, the lord of glory, is going to come into time and space.

He's going to be revealed in royal David's city. Isn't that the language of the Christian gospel? Not, I've got a nice theory for you. Not, wouldn't it be good if. The language of the gospel, the language of Christmas, is the language of reality, of history.

[8 : 11] Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed. That's what Micah is pointing forward to. He is, in this insignificant village, to this village, is going to come one where the prophets tell us is God himself and yet God's agent.

One of the places in the Old Testament where the plurality in God where the doctrine of the Trinity without being spelled out, obviously, is anticipated. And this one will defeat his enemies.

Verse 3, therefore he shall give them up when she who is in labor has given birth. Now, this is a theme that runs through the prophets as well.

The virgin will conceive and bear a son. And then in the book of Revelation in chapter 12, that glorious passage about the child who is born and snatched up to God and to his throne.

Surely the shortest life of Christ ever written. Going straight from Bethlehem to glory without anything intervening because God's purposes are so sure.

[9 : 16] But it's interesting what he says in verse 6. They shall shepherd the land of Assyria and the land of Nimrod. Now, Nimrod takes us way back to Genesis 10.

That warlord who defied God and who founded the city of Babylon, the anti-god city which all through history is going to contend with Zion.

So you see what's happening here. Micah is saying this incident that's happening in 8th century Jerusalem, this great juggernaut of Assyria who's come against us, this terrifying slaughter and murder and mayhem.

This is not something surprising because this is coming from the land of Nimrod, the warlord who started off this anti-god coalition, so to speak. And it's something that will continue until the time of the coming one, of the coming shepherd.

shepherd. Now, shepherd for us often suggests simply a rural, pastoral, sort of idyllic scene hall on an April evening and all that sort of thing. But in the Old Testament world, shepherd was a title that the Assyrian kings and sometimes the pharaohs arrogated to themselves.

[10 : 32] I think very tender about that. So you see the problem when you say Christmas is about children. How on earth is that going to stand up to this powerful juggernaut? And don't worry about seven shepherds and eight princes of men.

That's an Old Testament way of expressing totality. This one who is to come is going to handle all the problems. The problems that began in the land of Nimrod, the problems that will continue throughout history, the problems that will only be finally destroyed when the king comes.

And one thing which you must always remember when we're reading the prophets, there's the two horizons. The prophets look into the distance there to them is revealed that a messiah, a king, a conqueror, a suffering servant would come.

What was not revealed to them was that it wouldn't all happen at the same time. We'll come back to that. They didn't see that there was going to be a gap between the comings.

Now we talk about the second coming. The New Testament tends simply to say the coming because it's all part of the same process because when he came the first time, when he came and stood up against the land of Nimrod of that time, which of course was Herod and the Roman Empire at the time he came, this is a trailer of what he's going to do in the last days.

[11 : 54] Once in our world, said C.S. Lewis, there was a stable which had something in it which was bigger than the whole world. That is the message of the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

Not sentimental. It's nothing to do with the kind of twaddle you get in some of the carols. Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

Those of you who are parents, what kind of a baby is it who doesn't cry? Something's wrong, isn't there? That's what the early church called docetism. He only appeared to be human.

But he wasn't. He was little, weak, and helpless. Tears and smiles like us he knew. And at his birth, the hopes and fears of all the years gather around that stable as they gather around that cross and gather around the empty tomb.

So that's the first thing. Who is the shepherd? The shepherd is the one who was of old from ancient days, the king of eternity, the one who will shepherd his flock, the one who, when he comes, will deal with the land of Assyria and the land of Nimrod.

[13 : 09] But secondly, in verses 7 to 9, how will he reign? What will happen when he comes? Verse 7, then the remnant of Jacob. Now, as the darkness gathers over the land of Judah and Israel, as the exile approaches and the clouds darken and deepen, the prophets begin to speak increasingly about the remnant.

Even if the whole nation goes astray, God will preserve a remnant. And that is exactly what we get in the Gospels, particularly at the beginning of Luke, the remnant to whom and from whom the Messiah would come.

And that's exactly what we have in the early chapters of Luke. A handful of people, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Anna and Simeon to be joined by the shepherds and to be joined later by the wise men.

Remember what Simeon says, my eyes have seen your salvation as the child of Jesus was presented to him. So, even though it looks all against the cause of God, the remnant is there, the remnant of Jacob.

It often seems so in our day as well. We are told that 3% of the British people go to church. And that's not even talking about the committed people.

[14 : 29] That's talking about people whose names happen to be on rolls. Possibly, over the next weeks it will be something more like 6%. But that isn't the point, is it? The point is that it is to the remnant that Emmanuel comes.

It's not because they are great or influential as God said about his ancient people. It wasn't because you were bigger than the nations of the world. You're the smallest of the nations of the world.

And we remember at Christmas, as we remember always when the gospel is preached, that people are safe. Not because they are great, not because they are powerful, not because they are influential, but because God is with them.

And as people are added to the Messiah's kingdom, that grows and anticipates the kingdom to come. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.

Many of us would prefer it would come more dramatically with razzmatazz, with headlines and so on. But it doesn't come that way. Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

[15 : 41] Someone kneels beside their bed and gives their life to the Lord. Someone at a meeting is struck powerfully and deeply by the word of the gospel and they surrender their lives to him.

Not very dramatic, not headline grabbing, but that is the way the Messiah's kingdom increases because it is to the remnant the Messiah's come. And these people then become the channels of his life.

Look at the metaphor, they are like Jew from the Lord, like showers on the grass. In other words, they live as those whose origin and lifestyle derive from a world beyond the world of the senses, don't they?

Like Jew and rain. This is living because God has entered not only history but human lives. Oh holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray, cast out our sins and enter in and be born in us today.

I wonder if everybody in this building has prayed that prayer because this is a good time to do it. You don't need to do it dramatically. It doesn't need to be great scenes of emotion.

[16 : 49] It is a definite turning away from evil. The definite turning to the one who has come to save you. But notice as well this remnant who is so small, this kingdom which seems so pathetic is also, verse 8, like a line among the beasts of the forest which when it goes treads down.

Your hands shall be lifted up over your adversaries. Not only are they small and not only are they despised, they have the roar of Aslan behind them.

The roar that cannot be silenced and that cannot be overcome. Isn't that what we've been noticing in the studies in the book of Acts these past Sunday mornings?

Somebody, I can't remember who it was, wrote a commentary on that gospel, sorry, on the Acts called The Gospel Cannot Be Stopped. Which is what the Acts is about, isn't it?

And surely that's what Micah in a different way is saying as well. This king comes, he comes humbly, he comes unseen, how silently, how silently.

[18 : 01] The remnant who receive him, who welcome him, who crown him their king and take him into their lives are equally obscure and yet they roar with the voice of the lion.

They are linked with the lion of Judah. That brings us to the third part of the chapter, how will he establish his kingdom? Verses 10 to 15, in that day.

Now the prophets frequently use this phrase, in that day, or sometimes in those days, or sometimes the Lord has a day. As I say, they didn't see clearly the sequence of events that would unfold, the coming to Bethlehem and then the coming again.

And that's why when they anticipate the kingdom, when the prophets look into the future and anticipate what's going to happen, they obviously use images from this world to describe it.

After all, how else can we talk about the world to come other than images drawn from this world? At both ends of the Bible, the story of creation and the story of new creation.

[19 : 07] The only way we have access to that is through images and pictures taken from our world which can express the reality. Very often, these are positive images, aren't they? The desert will blossom like the rose.

The wolf will lie down with the lamb. Here, Micah uses negative images. What will not be in the kingdom of the shepherd, in the kingdom of the Messiah when he comes?

And that's the point of these verses. His coming is a challenge to all human power, to all human institutions. It's a different kind of kingdom, a different kind of ruler.

And first of all, this is a kingdom where there will be no confidence in human strength. Verse 10, I will cut off your horses from among you and will destroy your chariots.

Those of you who are fond of horses, please don't think the Bible is anti-horse per se. That's not what's being talked about here. What is being talked about here is the passage in Deuteronomy where horses are seen as a symbol of human power and the king of Israel is warned not to multiply horses.

[20 : 17] That was one of the signs that Solomon was going off the rails when he began to build up his military hardware. So it's a warning against false security. You will, I will cut off your horses, I will destroy your chariots, I will cut off the cities, throw down the strongholds.

Now cities, after all, are centers of power, aren't they? In a sense of economic power, political power, the power of ideas, the power of fashion. That's why, isn't it, the apostles concentrated on cities and then evangelized the hinterland.

Tim Keller, who is preached here, has often said that if you win the cities, you win the nation because of the influence that the cities have on the cultural life and the thought patterns of the people around them.

That's why it's so important, this ministry in the heart of Glasgow, not just for Glasgow, but for the whole country and far beyond. Cities with their power and surely, the cities of our land are beginning to be cut off economically, perhaps not in terms that they were in Micah's time of being destroyed.

Surely we're seeing that. And surely God is saying to us in that, don't depend on human power. All kinds of security not built on God will not last.

[21 : 39] That's what Micah is saying here. So, first of all, when the Messiah comes, when his kingdom comes, there will be no confidence in human strength. And that's equally true when his kingdom dawns in a heart and life.

The priorities change, the security changes, the confidence changes. And secondly, verses 12 to 14, there will be no confidence in bogus religion.

I will cut off sorceries from your hand and you shall have no more tellers of fortunes. What is sorcery, ultimately? Sorcery is an attempt to be like God.

It's the old sin, isn't it? You will be like God, knowing good. And evil. To manipulate the forces of nature, to manipulate the future, to manipulate people.

You can see it's so attractive, isn't it? Because that gives security. We are in charge. We can cope. Notice verse 13. You shall bow down no more to the work of your hands.

[22 : 44] Because essentially, sorcery, idolatry, is enthroning ourselves. how different that is from the faith of the Bible. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Not in the works of my hands, not in the works of my brain, not in the works of my imagination. This is a refusal to trust in God. I will root out your Asherah images.

The Asherah poles, we read about the priests of Asherah in the story of Elijah. essentially the goddess of fertility and sex. And it's not difficult to see the parallel with the commercialization of sex in our culture.

So what is this child? He is a challenge to false security. He is a challenge to bogus religion with the poor and mean and lowly lived on earth our saviour holy.

Why did God bypass Rome and Alexandria and Athens and go to the lowly cattle shed? Because that is the way God works, isn't it? God does not endorse and underwrite human power and human arrogance.

[23 : 56] But the final point that Micah makes about how he will establish his kingdom is that he will reign over the nations. Verse 15, in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.

On the nations that did not listen to the invitation. On the nations that turned down the grace of God when it was offered. This is his vindication.

This is his lordship. This is his judgment. Where there is blessing there must also be judgment. Because if there is no judgment then the mixture of good and evil the things that happen in our lives which are so frustrating the things that cause us agony and pain these will continue unless the lord executes vengeance on the nations.

And here Micah is looking beyond that to the to the coming again. Because as as I said already in the New Testament we have these two comings. In when he came to Bethlehem he came in he came incognito so to speak.

Now C.S. Lewis said the young prince of glory landed in disguise behind the enemy lines. And that's that's the story of the first coming. And yet that coming that cross judged the world.

[25 : 20] In a sense all that the final coming will do will reveal the true state of affairs. But the at the moment the message of the gospel is still available.

The day of vengeance has not yet come. You may remember that passage in Luke where Jesus reads from Isaiah to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and he stops before the next phrase which is the day of vengeance of our God.

That would come and he would introduce it. But at that moment and at this moment as well the acceptable year of the Lord is being proclaimed. That's what Christmas is about.

It's not about children although we have children have a wonderful time with them. I loved it when our kids were small at Christmas. That's not what it's about. What it's about is the fact that the true shepherd the strong shepherd will come.

He will defeat all our enemies and he will open the kingdom of heaven to all who believe. And that's a wonderful message to take into Christmas with us is it not?

[26 : 22] Let's pray. Almighty God give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light here in the time of this mortal life when our Saviour came to visit us in great humility so that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead we may be made like him in his eternal kingdom where he lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit one God now and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.