

I have never forgotten some words I read in a book by contemplative writer James Finlay about 8 years ago. I've often mulled them over and they have expanded my consciousness even as I questioned them.

James Finlay defined prayer as

“the distilled awareness of our whole life before God”

Wow, I thought- is that even possible?

When I verbalized that thought to the spiritual director I was seeing at the time, he just smiled and didn't answer. It was a helpful response. It's not the sort of question that benefits from a quick and easy reply.

But I think that actually he did know the answer to my question. He demonstrated that, not in words but by his life, and even more in his engaged and courageous dying late last year.

Yes, it is indeed possible to reach a place of distilled awareness of your whole life before God.

Part of the reason for my incredulous response was to do with my lack of spiritual experience I guess. But I was also preoccupied with the many things going on in my life and the pushes and pulls of the world in which we live. Maybe too, it was a result of having been brought up without the expectation that this depth of connection with a spiritual reality was even possible.

I wonder if some of the people the prophet Micah addressed were in a similar place. Growing up within the rituals of the Temple, and just getting on with their lives as best they could. Accepting the normal values of their day and having lost touch with the possibility of a deeper and more vibrant relationship with their God.

It seems there were other people in those times who were more calculating and ruthless. They took advantage of those less powerful and did all they could to get what they wanted. It is for them that Micah reserves his fiercest condemnation.

Micah lived in the 8th C BCE, born in the small town of Moresheth, about 40kms from Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah.

He lived in troubled times. The superpower of the age was Assyria, who dominated the region, invading territories, plundering and pillaging and, in 701, laying siege to Jerusalem.

There were internal problems too and Micah challenged the injustice and corruption that were rife in the political, judicial, religious, and economic systems of the day. He called out corrupt leaders, greedy landowners, people-pleasing prophets, and dishonest shopkeepers alike.

The reading from Micah chapter 6 is like a court scene. We see God holding the people of Judah to account for their abandonment of the old, long-established values. More fundamentally, they have lost the aliveness and joy in their relationship with the Holy One. This has had a flow on effect on other connections within the community, which are also out of kilter.

This court is more like a family court than a criminal court. Relationships and intense emotions are involved. Have a look at the reading in the order of service. I asked the office to print it in colour so you could imagine the different voices more easily. The words of the prophet are in black, the words of God in red and the words of the people in blue. As I read it I was trying to hear the tone of voice of the different speakers.....

God sounds angry, hurt and perplexed perhaps, but also tender and sad. God wonders what has caused this breach in the relationship, reminding the people of previous times in their history when God has demonstrated steadfast love, faithfulness and leadership towards them.

The people in turn respond, and I wasn't so sure about their tone. Are they afraid and being placating? Are they being straightforward and honest. Or are they being a bit sarcastic and entitled?

And then the sure, steady voice of Micah calling them back to the deep rooted knowledge of their ancestors, to what they have experienced in their lives and to what they already know in the depths of their being.

"No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good,

And this is what he requires of you:

To do what is right, to love mercy

And to walk humbly with your God"

Or as the more familiar NIV version puts it...

"To **act justly** and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"

These well known words attract us and resonate for us as a progressive congregation. They were mentioned more than once at Graham Howell's funeral last year as we remembered his life and work.

Exploring the meaning of these principles more deeply may reveal not only what was expected of God's people in the 8th C BCE, but by implication, of us today.

One commentator finds a useful way to think about this text.

Paula Gooder notes that the imperatives to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God involve **ACTION, ATTITUDE and LIFESTYLE**.

action (act justly).....

attitude (love mercy).....

and **lifestyle** (walk humbly).

(Gooder p205).

It's a very holistic approach, involving all aspects of a person's life.

Acting justly has to do with doing specific things to redress power imbalances and oppression.

The **attitude** of loving mercy means responding generously from a place of faithful concern for, and solidarity with, others.

The **lifestyle** of walking humbly with God doesn't imply as we might think, making ourselves small. Instead it implies an ongoing careful and attentive way of life, connected with God.

(Achte-meier 1999, Waltke 1988 and Allen 1976)

This is pretty demanding stuff if you spend some time really thinking about it.

Perhaps in order to comfort and inspire, Micah also paints a picture of the results of these principles if they were put into practice.

“They will hammer their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore.

Everyone will live in peace and prosperity,
enjoying their own grapevines and fig trees,
for there will be nothing to fear.”

Micah 4:3-4)

This sounds like a healthy and fulfilling life. Meaningful work, peaceful relationships and freedom from fear. It touches into deep longings in the human heart. It also points the way towards some of the revolutionary writings of the New Testament. We listened to a couple of examples today in the inspiring poetry of the Beatitudes and those countercultural words from the first letter to the Corinthians.

So how can we ordinary humans access the strength and knowledge we need to meet the injustices of the world in a consistent way?

When the Christchurch Mosque shootings happened, I was determined to do something about it. I worked out five or six things I thought would be helpful. In the end three of them came to fruition. It was a short term commitment and didn't seem like much really, but it was something.

The words of 1 Corinthians 1 vs 24 point to how we can develop the strong core in our spiritual lives that we need.

When we are in touch with **“God’s dynamic power and deep wisdom”** then we may find the power and wisdom to act justly, love mercy and live humbly with our God. Then our actions in the world will be effective and sustainable.

The ancient Israelites were onto something when they realized that worship was central to their relationship with God. They knew it was important even though they had become disconnected from the essence of what that meant.

We know it’s important too.

We can connect with God’s dynamic power and deep wisdom, mysterious and beyond our understanding, at different levels.

As we meet to worship together in this place, we are reminded that we are part of a long and rich tradition. We hear and sing words that are life-giving and affirming. We are encouraged and inspired by those around us.

We are a gathered and diverse community, scattered over the Wellington region, with a range of beliefs, personalities and spiritual needs. So many of us belong to other groups and networks that feed our faith and inspire action.

Some are drawn to a contemplative approach and join a meditation group or go on retreats. Others like to read, study and debate. There are those who join in shared social action or link in with kindred spirits in lobbying for change. And still others express themselves creatively in music, craft work or writing.

Individual spiritual practices can also help bridge the gap between our intention and the complex realities of our world. Meditation, lectio divina, imaginative prayer, journalling or any other activity that connects us with the Holy on a regular basis, can both confront and nurture us. Doing this inner work supports us in our outer work and our actions will spring from a strong spiritual centre.

Drawing to a close, I’d like to share a couple of things about this passage from Micah chapter 6 that give me hope.

You may have noticed that the sacrifices the people offer God are very concrete. Burnt offerings, yearling calves, thousands of rams and rivers of olive oil. Even first born children! Concrete but external. A bit tokenistic? Maybe even a way of keeping God at a safe distance?

Instead what God asks is not only more personal, but more freeing. We are each encouraged, in fact expected, to be creative in our attempts to embody these axioms, acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

Imagine for a moment what that could look like for you?

The second source of hope for me in these words is the meaning of “walking humbly with your God”.

As mentioned earlier, this means living an ongoing careful and attentive way of life, in connection with God.

So it's a process, we don't have to accomplish this perfectly, at once!

It begins with care and attentiveness in our daily lives. Maybe just small simple actions. Here and now, one day at a time, in response to what we experience around us.

And it's a part of a relationship, a collaboration with the God who is a God of justice, who loves mercy and is an ongoing presence.

The spiritual director I talked about at the beginning of this reflection, lived his life as part of a strong faith tradition and in community. His commitment involved education and encouraging spiritual growth through faith groups and in individuals. He followed intentional daily spiritual practices. It didn't look like it was a heavy burden for him, (he still had time to play golf!) but rather a joyful and meaningful offering of his life to God.

Day by day we can become more and more open, listening with care and deepening compassion, and responding to our world with wisdom drawn from the Sacred connection within.

As we seek to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God it may surprise us to find that, we too have times when we experience “the distilled awareness of our whole lives before God”.

That in our imperfect but beautiful attempts to align with the principles Micah articulated, to embody these alluring attributes, our whole lives have become a prayer.

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