

Reflective Worship – Sunday 1st September

To act justly ...

Micah 6:8

1 Kings 21:1-21a

INTRODUCTION

Last time, you may recall, we thought about the message of the prophet Micah. His situation, the nation's situation, the world around him and his message from God to the people, leaders and the world. And we finished with these words from Micah 6

⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly^[a] with your God.

Words for the times. The fluid regional politics, the abuses of society, the powerful and rich using their power and riches to become richer; the corrupt judges and rulers, establishment figures who refused to change, who could not see the faults of the system because their eyes were too blind.

We thought about how we could sense echoes in our own culture. The rich getting richer, while there are 4 million people in this country trapped in poverty. Property owned by absentee landlords charging exorbitant rent; abuse of children; trafficking and modern slavery; youngsters being caught up in drug addiction and crime. The list goes on. We might even add the proroguing of Parliament.

And we said that over the next weeks we would try to see what God means by justice, mercy and to walk humbly with him, and how that affects who we are and what we do.

So today we look at justice.

But here we are not thinking about justice in the sense of someone being punished for their crimes – that's about receiving justice. We're not thinking of law courts, judges and sentences. That is what's known as retributive justice we will touch on this next time.

What we are thinking about today is much more to do with acting justly (as in the quote from Micah). In scripture acting justly is linked with the fate of the widow, the orphan, the alien, the stranger, the poor – the powerless or we

might say the victims of injustice. Today we might add the refugee, the outcast, the “other”.

It can be quite confusing that two different ideas or concepts are brought to mind by the one word **justice**. And I hope you can get an idea of the distinction I am trying to make tonight. What we are thinking about tonight is actions. Its about what we do and what the nation does, rather than how we or the judicial system responds to lawbreaking or crime.

Acting justly.

So – a story from the Old Testament from 1 Kings 21 about a man called Naboth, a King called Ahab and a Queen called Jezebel.

READ 1 KINGS 21 :1-21a

Picture the scene. Naboth has come into the house from inspecting the vines. The grapes are ripening as they should. The sun is shining. All is well. These are good grapes. They are not the best – they don’t produce prize winning vintage wines, but they produce a very drinkable wine. And Naboth knows a lot about how to produce a good wine from grapes like these. The skills and knowledge were passed down to him by his grandfather and father and he will pass them on to his sons. And the land. The land – the vineyard – was handed down to him and will be handed on to his sons. That’s the way it is and has always been. That’s how it should be. The land is family land. And so Naboth comes into the house, pours himself a glass of wine made from last year’s grapes and sits on the veranda sipping what he has made. All is well with the world. All is well with his vineyard. All is well for the family.

But suddenly the calm is disrupted. A messenger from the King – from the KING! – arrives. Naboth’s life is turned upside down. What kind of request (or is it a demand?) is this? The vineyard – he wants the vineyard for a vegetable garden. The land. The family land. Can he refuse the King? He talks well into the night with his wife – and they get through a surprising amount of last years wine in their discussions. Surely I can’t refuse the King. But surely its wrong not to pass this land – our land – our vineyard – on to our children. OK the money might be useful, but how long would it last? The farm the King is offering sounds good – but that’s not the point. This is my land. Our land . The family land. Surely the King will understand that. I cannot agree to his proposal.

But we know how the story ends. The King has his way, aided and abetted by his wife. And it takes an Elijah – a prophet, someone who speaks in the name of God – to stand up against him.

But what about Naboth's brother Kanoe. He has a vineyard too. Somewhat different to Naboth's. Larger, more trees, more variety of trees, a jungle in fact. Kanoe lives in the Amazon basin, thousands of miles and thousands of years from Naboth. He knows about all the trees in his forest. Which leaves are good for medicines, which trees produce the best fruits, which saps produce poison for the tips of his hunting arrows. He knows where to find the capybara for his food, he knows how to live in this place and how to be at one with this place. His family have lived here through the generations, and it is surely right and proper that they will continue to do so.

In fact Kanoe is not his name – it's the name of his tribe. But there are only a handful of the tribe left now. An Ahab went to Kanoe's vineyard too. He didn't want to grow vegetables, but rubber, or was it logging, or gold extraction or was it to clear the land for beef production. It doesn't really matter. All we need to know is that Kanoe was taken from his land and subjected to intimidation and exposed to strange diseases that his immune system had never encountered. Driven from the forest to a city. A strange and bewildering place. He finds no work and no hope. There is no future for him or his family. The only consolation is found in things like alcohol and drugs. He tries to fight through the courts, but he has no "deeds" to his ancestral land, no legal rights to the land so has no case. Generations of history and intimate knowledge of land are useless.

Meanwhile Ahab strips his land of the thousands of tree species by setting a fire. A fire which not only destroys the rain forest, but also affects the eco system of the whole planet as these trees are vital to the world's health as well. He dams the river, plants single tree crops or uses the land to raise cattle for beef. He destroys the diversity and the wildlife and, of course, the tribal home. 10,000 years of forest dwelling are gone. Gone to make cheap furniture for cheap furniture stores destined for western bedrooms, lounges and kitchens. Gone to provide beef which satisfies the appetites of those on the other side of the world.

And it isn't just Naboth's human brothers and sisters. There are Ahabs who are destroying the homes and habitats of other creatures. You may recall that last Christmas the shop Iceland had their TV advert banned for being too political. (SHOW CLIP)

And Naboth has other relatives around the world too. In India, where the Government apprehends land which has been nurtured and grazed by families for hundreds of years. Again Naboth's relatives have no legal title to the land, and so receive no compensation. No future and no hope.

In Peru, in China, throughout the world Naboth's brothers and sisters suffer the same fate. The rich and powerful tread over the poor and powerless. Ahab gets his way.

And here in the UK. Surely Ahab is not here. But we read of some more of Naboth's brothers and sisters who work for Asda and are having their contracts rewritten. They are losing up to 8 days of paid holiday each year, losing around £500 a year because of changing of the way breaks are paid for. The only choice they have is to leave. No choice.

But remember – in the story that we read about Naboth, Ahab was challenged by the prophet Elijah. A man of God called him to account. A man of God stood up for what was right and pointed his finger at this gross injustice.

So where is Elijah today in the Amazon, in India, in Peru, in China or in the UK.

Does the Church stand up against injustice? Do we as individuals? Do we even wonder why our furniture is so cheap, why the price of tea and other commodities is so low, why clothes made in places like Bangladesh and Pakistan are so inexpensive. Do we ask questions.

But listen carefully and you can hear the voice of Elijah. Organisations like Christian Aid, Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund and many others. The whole fair trade movement. Climate change protestors seeking that the rich nations change their ways so that poor and vulnerable Pacific Island states like Tuvalu and Vanuatu do not disappear due to climate induced sea level rises – climate change to which they make virtually no contribution.

The voices of Elijah are here, but sometimes it's hard to hear them above the noise of Ahabs and Jezebels. Sometimes the Elijahs cause us inconvenience (like the Extinction Rebellion protests), sometimes they cost us money as we pay fairer prices for the production of resources. Sometimes they urge us to write and campaign. And the voices do not just speak out against the visible and obvious symptoms – the homelessness, the drug addiction, the poverty – but against the things that cause them. Against the actions of the many Ahabs and Jezebels around the world. Against the land grabs, the low prices paid, the denial of the reality of climate change and the exploitation of workers.

Ahab and Jezebel take many forms today in their acts of injustice, but there are voices of hope. There are the voices of many thousands of Elijahs across the world who seek to act justly and campaign and work for others to do the same. Who take the command of the Lord as given by the prophet Micah seriously. Who act justly and seek to get others to act justly as well.

I Kings 21

Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. ² Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth."

³ But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

⁴ So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

⁵ His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"

⁶ He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"

⁷ Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. ⁹ In those letters she wrote:

"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. ¹⁰ But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

¹¹ So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. ¹² They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. ¹³ Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. ¹⁴ Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned to death."

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." ¹⁶ When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.

¹⁷ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ¹⁸ "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard,

where he has gone to take possession of it. ¹⁹ Say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!'"

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!"

"I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. ²¹ He says, 'I am going to bring disaster on you.