Humility & Exaltation

October 30, 2005 (Proper 26, Year A)

Micah 3:5-12 Psalm 43 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13,17-20 Matthew 23:1-12

From Matthew's Gospel:
'All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'
(Mt. 23:12)

From the prayer of the Psalmist:
'Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.' (Ps. 43:3)

Today's readings from Micah and from Matthew draw us into a heavy landscape. The atmosphere is ominous and darkening. The air is thick with words of warning and judgment. In one sense, it feels a little like the antecedent to the worst storms in some of our recent weather.

Late in the 8th century BCE, the imagery of Micah anticipates the Assyrian invasion of the southern kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. He delivers a vivid, no holds barred indictment of false political and spiritual leadership.

> *Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob*
> *and chiefs of the house of Israel,*
> *who abhor justice*
> *and pervert all equity,*
> *who build Zion with blood*
> *and Jerusalem with wrong!...*
> *Therefore because of you*
> *Zion shall be plowed as a field;*
> *Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,*
> *and the mountain of the house a wooded height.*
> (Micah 3:9-10, 12)

In past weeks the Gospel readings from Matthew have shown Jesus in a series of testing encounters and challenges with Temple leadership, with scribes and with Pharisees. Now, very near the time of trial and crucifixion, Matthew portrays Jesus pronouncing a series of 'Woes', prophetic judgments against these establishment figures. Today's Gospel reading is the beginning of all that, and it is very heavy stuff indeed.

Jesus admonishes his listeners to pay attention to what the scribes and the Pharisees instruct – after all, they carry an authority in the succession of Moses. But, in the next breath, he warns against their hypocrisy. They're not willing to bear the burdens and obligations they lay upon others; they covet undue honor and engage in spiritual practices to draw attention to themselves. Jesus declares something of how the world of perceived relationships will be turned upside down in the coming time: 'All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.' (Mt. 23:12)

The words seem simple enough, but working out even some little part of what they may <u>now</u> mean for us is anything but simple. In fact the readings present big opportunities for temptation and risk.

For one thing, as the saying goes, 'the devil can quote scripture', and demonic voices within our society are certainly doing just that – using their reading of scriptures such as this as they spread messages of discrimination, fear and hatred. The continued obscenity of anti-Semitism has fed its unholy fires with some of Matthew's language.

On the other hand, from my own perspective, I've thought that Micah's words have a clear message for Washington, but the problem is Washington's establishment most probably would reply from their perspective, 'yes, we see the relevance; God will ultimately destroy those who oppose our righteous desire to defeat terrorism and spread democracy.' Hearing anything beyond our own most precious and unquestioned biases comes hard, not least with scripture interpretation.

William Loader from the Uniting Church in Australia has it straight:

> ‘Compassion and love dictate the way Scripture should apply, not a kind of legalistic bureaucracy which assumes God is a control freak. When God is our big ego writ large, then people will be abused in the name of purity or holiness or obedience. In every generation we can find examples of destructiveness done in the name of Scripture or even by means of Scripture.’

To whom really does Jesus speak then? It’s best to say that the message comes first to us: to me, to you. His words are not to be my ready weapon against others with whom I profoundly disagree. When we hear what he says first ourselves, try to take it in, pray over it, wrestle with it and do our best to live it out, then perhaps we may speak with others about what they think it may mean for them.

The exalted will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted. It’s not unlike what Jesus says elsewhere about the need to become like little children to enter the Kingdom. In God’s new time, the order of things is being transformed. It’s a kind of reversal of roles and expectations that is not yet complete. What is it that is to be lifted up? And what is it that is to be humbled? There are bear traps in the ways we may answer and respond.

After a difficult meeting with a particular colleague in the church my Dad would come home, take me aside with a special grin, and observe, ‘You know, the Reverend So-and-So is a very, very humble man, and he’s so proud of it!’

But, on the flip side, we can misuse ‘humility’ to defend hesitation and hiding and inaction. We don’t know enough yet. We don’t yet have our personal issues sorted out. We aren’t ready to have much impact on things. We just languish in our sense of insufficiency and call that ‘humility’.

Rather, put it another way! What is to be humbled is whatever it is that keeps me or you or this parish or the Church from fully living in God’s new time. What is to be lifted up, to be ‘exalted’, is our deepening sense that we belong to God and to what God is doing <u>right now</u> – that we are, in fact, a part of God’s new creation. That transformation is at work in us, in all that has been, in all that is, in things yet to be, and we, in our turn, are to be God’s instruments of change and healing and the new birthing of justice. That, in every way, is what really matters. That is what God will lift up. Nothing must hold it back!

This has become very personal to me. When I walk into this room, my attention often comes to its first focus on this Cross, the Cross of the Risen Christ. It has become for me an icon of the heart of life’s meaning.

I do not fully understand what it all means, and I know that I never will. But, more and more, I’ve come to believe that this One upon whose figure I gaze understands me. He has claimed me. He will not ever let me go. My future path is a continued walk upon that sacred ground.

I believe that that is true for me, but I share it because I believe that, more important than anything else in our lives, that is the most wonderful truth for you.

What is to be humbled is whatever obstructs or opposes that truth.

What is to be lifted up is the grace and wonder, the holy opportunities, the joy and the promise, of our life together and in this world, as we pray with the Psalmist:

> *‘Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me,*
> *and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.’*

In the Name of the Eternal Christ, Amen.

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