

1000 Years of Christianity in Cruden Bay

Context

Ecumenical Service on the Feast Day of St Olaf at St Olaf's Well near where a church was set up after the Battle of Crochdane in 1012 as an act of remorse for the fallen. Thus began formal Christian observance and worship in what we know as the parish of Cruden Bay.

An open-air service with these readings commemorated this.

Readings: Micah 6:6-8, John 15:1-8

“With what shall I come before the Lord.”

Thus began our first reading, taken from the book of Micah, and forming the first of our two readings today.

The Book of the Prophet Micah is not a single composition put together by a one author.

Nor does it belong to any short-term or precise period in the history of the Hebrew people.

It is a collection of sayings, drawn together over a period of about 200 years under God's inspiration, for sure, and placed within one unit in the form of individual sayings recognized as having divine origin.

This is so because the message of the Book of Micah isn't so much for one set of people at a particular time in history but is rather for all people at all times in their history.

It is therefore a word for us in our time.

“With what shall I come before the Lord?” asked the prophet in the book Micah.

His concern was for the individual person and for communities of people to have a right relationship with God. And so he asks a number of rhetorical questions that might help show the people how to establish this right relationship with their maker.

His first question in the passage we heard a few moments ago was: ‘Should he place before the altar of God burnt sacrifices?’

Well, if this isn’t sufficient he goes on to ask, ‘what about offering thousands of rams?’ The question is a ridiculous one, and the first hearers of this passage would know it was, because barely anyone other than the richest of middle eastern despots had enough money to pay for it.

But the writer persists with his questions and does so with rising levels of impossibility, ‘what about ten thousands of rivers of oil?’

You can’t even do it. It’s a question beyond reality.

Undaunted he continues his rhetoric, namely to offer his ‘firstborn child’. Surely bizarre. It was contrary to Hebrew Law then, and of course, remains so, now.

No, that won’t do. None of these will do for the person seeking a right relationship with God.

And the compiler of this bit of Micah knows it. That’s why he deliberately asks impossible questions of rising nonsense.

God can’t be bought with even the greatest of riches or most sumptuous of sacrifices. None of this will do. That’s the point the writer is trying to make.

Think for a moment of where we are now. Right here on these links. Somewhere near, or on, the site of the Battle of Crochdane, Cruden, where Danes and Scots fought each other for victory.

And then after the euphoria of battle had eased, with spilt blood now dried into the sand and coagulated clots degenerating amidst the marren grass, perhaps, just perhaps, more steady heads reflected on the significance of it all.

Was there remorse for the fighting? Was there sadness at the sight of corpses lying, waiting to be cleared, tossed into a mass grave, left for the seagulls or to be swilled away by the waves? Was there, just perhaps in some minds, a thought that

whatever the dispute was that had engaged and enraged them on that day, well, maybe, just maybe, it could have been resolved another way?

What was it Micah said in his collection of oracles, his sayings from God, and voicing an ancient wisdom, "With what shall I come before the Lord ...?"

I wonder if the victors of Crochdane said this, or something like it, to themselves ... ? Some no doubt didn't. But we can conjecture that others did. We can imagine that they encountered some sort of wisdom that made them regret the need for bloodshed to settle dispute.

'With what shall we come before the Lord?' is the question. Did they answer, 'We shall come before the Lord with bloodied swords, with fly infested cadavres on the beach, with body odour foul from the fight, and grim faces set for yet more bitterness ...?'

Is this what they thought? At least we have it that some of them didn't. Enough of them sought fit to establish a place where people could come and pray, could meet together and worship, hear the melodies of faith from of old and share in that new music of their day; the newly emerging plainsong.

In the hearts of some of them at least was remorse for the fallen and because of this remorse in their hearts they established a church and dedicated it to St Olaf near this spot.

This is what counts; not so much the building of a place of worship but the remorse of the heart for a wrong committed, and an urgency to be right with God.

The psalmist says, 'Burnt offerings and sin offerings I do not require...' what God desires of his faithful followers is a "humble and contrite heart".

What was told to Micah in response to his question for what God requires is not the ridiculously unattainable offerings he was gesturing; nor is it a plea bargain based on how rich one is, or how victorious one has been in battle, but what God requires of each of his followers is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with ... God."

Before anything else this is an orientation of the heart.

In establishing a place of worship here, the *remorseful* people *in response to the aching of their heart* sought a new victor for the battle of these sand dunes.

And with that inner regret so began 1000 years of worship in this part of Scotland which we in our respective congregations, together maintain.

They listened to an ancient wisdom that seared into their souls and cauterized their consciences before God.

Before them was the same sort question as has been voiced in our hearing this morning, 'With what shall I come before the Lord.'

Yes your bible studies, and your prayer groups; yes, your complex studying of the nation's and the church's complex ethical issues of the day; yes, your flower festivals and yes, your songs of praise festivals.

All of these are vital, crucially important, but they are as naught if they are not the product of *cleansed hearts* that '*do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God*'.

... hearts which do this not only individually and personally but corporately within those churches of which you are members ...

It is a true people of God who walk before and with God, knowing their dependence upon him from deep, deep within the soul.

We do well never to bargain or to strike deals with God, or to get God to heed the price we offer for right relationship with him.

God does not require our sacrifices, but a 'humble and contrite heart'.

The sort of heart which comes before Him in humility and in contrition for things done wrong.

If you want to take something away with you today, that will serve you now and which you can hand on to the next generation and for a thousand years still to come, it will be for each of us *from deep within our hearts* to, '*do justice, to live kindness and to walk humbly with God*'.

Amen and may God add his blessing to us as we do.

†Robert Gillies

July 29th 2012