

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 1st February 2026
The Fourth Sunday after
Epiphany
The Revd Andy Braunston

Call To Worship

With what shall we come before God?
Burnt offerings? Wealth and riches to lay at God's feet?

With what shall we come before God?
Shall we sacrifice even those dearest to us –
the fruit of our body to blot out the sin of our souls?

With what shall we come before God?
Do we need to appease an angry God?

With what shall we come before God?
**God has told us mere mortals what is good;
to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with our God.**

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

O Most High,
we come to You in these dark days of winter,
where light is scarce, winds are cold, and we are drenched in rain.
We come to worship and adore. We come to hear and obey.
We come to love and offer You our praise.

O Risen Lord Jesus,
we come to You in these dark days of winter,
We come with our faith and our doubts,
our questions and our certainties, our moans and our groans.
Forgive us, good Lord, when we complain about our lot,
when the struggles of life seem to overwhelm us,
and we cry to You in our selfishness and pain,
expecting You to save us from problems of our own making.
Forgive us and remind us of what You expect from us!

O Most Holy Spirit
we come to You in these dark days of winter,
trusting in Your loving kindness which gives us time to change.
reminding us of Your presence, even when we doubt,
assuring us of Your love, even when we have our heads in mire,
showering us with mercy, even when we forget to do justice,
live kindness, and walk humbly with You.

Give us grace, Eternal Trinity,
to accept the love and forgiveness You offer us,
and to share love and forgiveness with others, and with ourselves. Amen

Prayer for Illumination

Welcome us into your tent, O Most High,
that we may walk blamelessly, do what is right, and speak the truth.
As we listen to Your word read and proclaimed,
let there be no slander nor evil in our lives,
that we may keep our promises and live lives of integrity. Amen

All Age Activity

The URC's Children and Youth team have produced [these notes](#) on the Micah passage and [these resources](#) on the Matthew.

Readings

Micah 6:1-8 | Psalm 15 | 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 | St Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon Notes

Micah

Micah was a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah and ministered in the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. His messages were directed to the elite in Jerusalem and prophesied the destruction of Israel and Samaria by the Assyrians and the destruction, and restoration, of the southern state of Judah. Perhaps the end of today's passage is the most well-known verse in the book (along with the prophecy in chapter 5 about Bethlehem being the birthplace of the Messiah). Today's passage reads a little like a legal argument, with an audience, and is concerned with the breakdown of the people's relationship with God. The Lord has a case against His people whom he rescued from Egypt, but who displease him. An advocate asks what God requires and wonders about burnt offerings and sacrifice - even to the point of offering their firstborn - but the prophet

reminds us that God has already demanded we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” In an age attuned to the ecological crises which engulf us we are captured by the striking image of God asking mountains and their foundations to bear witness to the divine words. Of course, now creation does more than bear witness to our sinful behaviour but groans with the agony we inflict upon it due to our greed and sin. Maybe the passage is in response to the people moaning about God and, in this passage, Micah turns the tables and reminds the people what God expects of them rather than what they should expect from God. If so, the rhetorical device has captured the imagination of believers for millennia. God does not critique people for complaining but offers a counter narrative – even though life has been difficult God has been there journeying with and freeing the people from their enslavement asking. In return, we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Perhaps the best way to do these things is to follow the precepts Jesus gives in the Beatitudes. The prophet shows that God is not concerned about the nature of our worship but the quality of our lives. I wonder how believers now might respond to this passage addressed, as it is, to them not those without faith. This is not a question asking how to be saved but asking how the believer should behave. Whether we’re in a small congregation gathering in a simple unadorned meeting house or part of a crowd of hundreds in a great cathedral we only truly worship if we do those things which God requires.

Psalm 15

The Psalm continues the theme of right living that was started in our reading from Micah. It is thought the Psalm was part of the liturgical life of ancient Israel and sung by pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem and the Temple. There’s a left over thought from the days of the Holy of Holies containing the Arc of the Covenant being a tent in the middle of the wandering people of God in the opening line. The demands of ritual purity for worship are ones which give us pause: no lying in an age devoted to “alternative facts”, no shaming others in an age delighting in scandal and the unmasking of (other people’s) proclivities, no bankers in a late capitalist society, no bribery in a corrupt world. We might despair. We might think of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth and remind ourselves that Jesus is the one who can enter blamelessly into God’s presence on our behalf. We might, however, ponder how thoughtlessly us modern people come into God’s presence; a wonderful desire to move away from fear and self-loathing has meant we’ve also ditched awe and wonder – especially in Protestant forms of worship. We, rightly, come just as we are without one plea but know that we can’t stay as we are. In worship we are shaped and guided to live lives worthy of our calling, to become the people able to stand firm in God’s presence, to live as God intends.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Paul understood that the idea of a god becoming flesh and suffering made no sense to the wise educated pagan folk of his age. Gods were powerful and invincible; they did not get themselves executed in a shameful fashion reserved only for slaves and foreigners. Paul knew that the claims of Christianity made little sense in his own age and so

contrasted the wisdom of the age with God's wisdom. Our foolishness is God's wisdom. Paul looked back to Isaiah to bring some weight to what he said (cf Isaiah 29:14). A God who had used pagan nations to castigate Israel and then stopped those nations in their tracks could, without doubt, use the Cross and Paul's preaching to make a difference. The Corinthian church may have comprised people from a range of social classes "not many of you were wise by human standards" implies some were and had done well for themselves but most hadn't. Paul implied this should not bother them – why play the world's game which won't, ultimately, be rewarding? Instead, God's own self chose what was low and despised in the world to reduce to nothing things that are. If using this reading you might muse that the Beatitudes show a way of living, along with Micah and the Psalm, which is very silly really. Our society wants us to do well, get a good education, a good job, become heavily indebted and boost the economy. We're told what life is about and it doesn't seem to be about the things that Jesus, Micah and our Psalmist are interested in. Maybe we too are foolish in the world's eyes but maybe, too, we're always pulled back and forth between the demands of our society and the world.

St Matthew 5:1-12

The United States of America was the first country in the world to have "the pursuit of happiness" as a goal in its founding documents. About 20 other countries have followed suit and our culture assumes life is all about happiness – and after all what's not to like about striving to be happy? Happiness can be bought, we're told, via online shopping companies or by wandering around actual shops. It comes from having the right things – the right job, partner, education, home, and family. Happiness is often cast as being dependent on what we have. If we don't have much then we wonder if we can be happy. Companies increasingly see it their mission to make us happy, for a price, and there is a whole industry of therapy, and medication, to if not make us happy stop us feeling sad. French sociologist Emile Durkheim though the hall mark of post-industrial society would be despair and alienation; maybe it's also unhappiness. Each beatitude in our Gospel reading starts with the Greek word *makarios* which is hard to translate into English; most Bibles render it as "blessed" some as "happy". It can mean fortunate, happy, privileged or spiritually prosperous. Certainly, our modern understanding of happiness doesn't include mourning, being poor, meek, yearning for justice, or being merciful. Peacemakers find their role challenging more than happy. The persecuted aren't happy nor are those who are reviled. Jesus' words only make sense with the perspective of the Kingdom where we're called to be blessed and find happiness only in the context of blessing. Being blessed is God's gift and isn't found in security, success, or status. Life in the Kingdom is about a promise of eternal, abundant life, not about wealth and worldly power. The conditions Jesus offers for a state of blessedness are signs of the inbreaking power of the Kingdom; they are a later rendition of Micah's words to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. The Kingdom is a reordering of the values of our world – some preachers try and shy away from that language preferring the rather weaker, "kin-dom" which speaks of relationship. Yet the point, I think, of Biblical Kingdom language is to offer a different vision of power, a different type of king.

Weaving the Threads

The skilful preacher will need to weave ideas of happiness versus blessing, showy worship versus justice, kindness and humility, the reality of who we are versus God's demands for holiness. In an age which demands happiness, but can never provide it, it's more realistic to think about what makes us blessed (and what allows us to be blessings to others), to take a step back from the cultural assumptions that happiness needs to be pursued, grasped and earned and, instead, to see the blessings that come from God as free gifts as the source of our meaning, purpose and, indeed, our happiness in life.

Affirmation of Faith

Our society tells us to be happy;
God tells us to be blessed!

Our social circles tell us to find happiness in possessions, status and wealth;
Jesus tells us to be poor in spirit!

Our social media influencers tell us to never be sad;
Jesus tells us when we mourn we are blessed and comforted!

Our culture admires the strong and mighty;
Jesus reminds us that the meek will inherit the earth!

Our leaders tell us not to disturb the status quo;
Jesus calls us to hunger and thirst for righteousness!

The press call for ever more draconian criminal sanctions against those they loathe;
Jesus tells us to be merciful in the hope we will receive mercy!

Our civilization delves into the mire to find dirt and scandal;
Jesus tells us to be pure in heart in order to see God!

Our nations are at war, or where not at war busy preparing for it;
Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, children of God!

We are obsessed by status and influence, and want people to think well of us;
Jesus tells us to be happy when we are reviled and persecuted!

Our society tells us to be happy;
God tells us to be blessed!

Offertory

Throughout human history there has been a desire to sacrifice, to offer what we value to

God; often sacrifice has been seen as a way to bribe or appease God; yet God desires not the sacrifice of crop or animal but a sacrifice of lifestyle where we leave behind our selfishness and, instead, joyfully serve God in others. We do this through the giving of our time, our talents and, of course our treasure. We give of our time as we listen to others, as we volunteer for any number of good causes, when we visit the sick or imprisoned. We give of our talents for church and charity, for friend and neighbour. We give of our talents on the plate, in little envelopes, direct to the bank, and for charities near and far. We give as an antidote to our human selfishness and self-centredness. So let us give thanks for all that is given in this church:

Eternal God,
we thank you for the gifts you give us, and for all that is good in our lives;
we thank You for gifts of time, talent and treasure in this congregation,
bless all that is given and help it make a difference in our world, Amen.

Intercessions

We bring our prayers to God who knows our needs,
feels our pain, and comforts our distress.

God of solace, in a world chasing after happiness
we bring to You those in need of deep life changing consolation:
hungry children in Gaza and frightened children in Israel,
girls longing for education in Afghanistan,
woman yearning for safety from male violence,
and parents on the move through Europe searching for sanctuary.

God, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of sanctification, in a world chasing after status,
we bring to You those in need of deep life changing blessing:
the poor and those excluded from our societies,
those who seek to change the world
yet are laughed at by the powerful, and
the prophets who call us to change our ways
but whom we prefer to ignore.

God, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of reconciliation, in a world continually at war,
we bring to You those seeking to make peace:
we pray for those who negotiate between warring countries,
those who seek to lead in troubled places,
those seeking to find community cohesion,
and those engaged in interreligious dialogue;

God, in Your mercy...**hear our prayer.**
In a moment's silence we bring to you, O God,
our own need of consolation,

Silence

Accept our prayers, Eternal God,
for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour,
who, through the Holy Spirit, hears us when we pray, Our Father...

Holy Communion

Introduction

All are welcome at this table;
those who have been here often, and those who have not been for a long time.
Those who have followed and those who have failed.
Those who have much faith, and those who have little.
Those who seek consolation in their pain, and those who seek joy in the gloom.
Come to this table, not because I invite you,
but because the Lord Jesus is both guest and host here,
and invites all who are weary and heavy laden,
to find comfort and joy in this bread and this wine,
where He feeds us with His very self, and gathers us into God's presence.

Thanksgiving

The Lord Jesus, in His teaching, turns our values upside down;
instead of seeking passing happiness,
He tells us to seek God's blessing where true joy is found.
Instead of seeking wealth he tells us to be poor in spirit.
Instead of chasing endless pleasure,
He tells us to find comfort when we mourn.
To the powerful he says the meek will inherit the earth!
To those who enjoy the way things are
he warns that those who yearn for justice will be fulfilled.
To those who exact revenge he teaches mercy in order to find mercy.
In an age of salacious scandal, Jesus tells us to be pure.
In a society seeking yet more war, Jesus holds up the peacemakers as children of God.
In a world afraid to speak truth, he promises blessings to the persecuted.
And so, we give thanks for all that Jesus taught,
and all that Jesus does in our own lives and in our own world.

Memory & Institution

For we remember the night, long ago,
when Jesus shared in the simplicity of a meal with his friends,
and, during the meal, he took some bread, said the ancient blessing,
broke the bread, and gave it to his friends saying:

“Take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body broken for you.
Do this in memory of me.”

And, later, after the meal, he took the cup filled with wine,
said the ancient blessing and giving the cup to his friends, said:

“Take this all of you and drink from it, this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this in memory of me.”

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Epiclesis

Come now, Most Holy Spirit,
on these simple things of bread and wine,
that they may be, for us,
the communion with the body and blood of Christ,
and that we may be, for Him, Christ’s hands and feet, love and action in the world.
Transform us as we follow Him in a world ever seeking,
but never finding,
happiness.

Doxology

We offer all our praise and all our pain, to You, O Most High,
through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever, Amen!

Post Communion

We thank You, O Most High,
for the blessings we receive at Your own hand.

We thank You, O Risen Lord,
for feeding us with Your own self as a mother feeds her children.
We thank You, Most Holy Spirit,

for being our consolation in the gloom.

Send us out to be

signs of lasting joy in a world of passing happiness,
icons of love in a world filled with hate,
and speakers of truth in a world full of lies. Amen

Blessing

May the One who offers real joy bless you.

May the One who feeds you with Himself allow you to feed others.

May the One who comforts your distress allow you to comfort others.

And the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit or Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word and Energising Spirit
be with you, and all whom you love,
and all whom you find hard to love
now and always, Amen

Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Here in This Place		623		
Come Living God When Least Expected	354	609		
God (Thou) Whose Almighty Word	38	112	106	699
For Everyone Born A Place At The Table		685		
Heaven Shall Not Wait		362	701	
The Right Hand of God	91	709	715	
Put peace into each other's hands	635	659	712	
The Kingdom of God is justice and joy	200		255	651
For the World and All its people		262		
When the hungry who have nothing		258		
Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go	521	529	550	428
Do Not Be Afraid	591	191		115

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*