

Gain the whole world

Micha 2

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

The theme of economic justice is not a matter for lefties, socialists or radical action groups only. The issue of economic justice is at the heart of the will of God for our world. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” the prophet Amos told the people of God.

Micah was a contemporary of Amos, and he had a similar message.

If we as Christians believe that God’s eternal Kingdom is one of justice for all people, then our prayer, Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, must make us predisposed to praying for and working for justice today.

1. Against profiteers

Micah complains about profiteers. Rich people who take agricultural fields of others, farm houses, and thereby they deprive men, women and children of their livelihood and of their inheritance.

In the darkness of the night these people make their plans, and then when the sun goes up, they do it, says Micah. And why do they do this? Simply, “because it is in the power of their hand.”



These people do not act because of any inherent morality, or because they need more property for their livelihood, but as it is possible to take the land of their neighbour, they take it. The fun of having more and much more than you need. Consumer capitalism.

Micah prophesied in the days of king Ahab, a notoriously unjust king. He took the vineyard of his neighbour Naboth, simply because he wanted it and because he had the power to do it.

King Ahab behaved as most large landowners in Israel did: they monopolised more and more land and thereby they could also dictate the price of food.

Imagine. This is 2.700 years ago. And this same economic evil still exists today. And our governments do hardly anything to stop this. Maybe they themselves participate in the advantages of this economy of always more.

In certain sectors of the economy a few owners have enriched themselves in a ridiculous manner.

Presently, there are reportedly 2,755 billionaires on earth. During the crisis of Corona, about 650 new people became billionaires. For the rich, crisis is good. It means opportunity.

The top 10 wealthiest people in the world together own over a trillion euro. Nothing stops them. Just as their friends 2.700 years ago, they do it "because it is in the power of their hand."

We have our notorious slumlords here in The Netherlands, 'huisjesmelkers'. People who have portfolios with 100s of houses and apartments, and their only goal is to maximise rental income.

We know the impact; people have great problems to now buy their own house, and even the poorest have to pay unheard of rents. The avarice of some, leads to the impoverishment of many.

Micah calls these profiteers the "enemy of my people." They were the internal enemy. They pushed women out of their houses, and from the children they took away their inheritance.

Mind you, this happened inside the community of the people of God. Inside the family of God. Micah is not speaking of evildoers from the gentile nations. He is talking about problems inside the church of God.

In the society of Israel, where land and inheritance were seen as the glory and honour of a family, it was extremely wicked to take that away from them.

It was also clearly a transgression of the laws of Moses that defended the rights of small landowners. Land was not to be sold, and should stay in the hands of the family.

But at the time of Micah, this land grabbing was "legal," just as today many things that are really immoral, are still legal.

The legality of a thing does not make it just. Being a slumlord is legal in most countries, but does it reflect God's view of a just society?

Being a billionaire is legal. But is it moral to have so much while others go to bed hungry? I think it is unjust and immoral.

2. Self-justification

Those wealthy land grabbers in Israel did not understand at all how Micah could criticise them. "Why do you preach this, do not say this," they told Micah. What Micah said, was not in accordance with their theology.



They were sure that they would never be ashamed. Shame was, in those days, the worst thing that could happen to you. Poverty, that was shameful, they argued. Being rich was an honor. And as we are rich, we are obviously people of honor.

The argument was so simple. Being rich shows that God is blessing you. That He is honouring you. And being poor is God's curse.

In many churches nowadays they even preach this, even though it directly contradicts what the prophets of Israel proclaimed, and what the apostles preached. And Jesus, He sided clearly with the havenots.

Yes, Jesus had diners with the slumlords of his time. But not to pet them on the shoulder and say you are wonderfully blessed by God and maybe you can give me and my team of apostles a good donation for our ministry...

Jesus told the people: 'If you want to be my followers, deny yourself and take up your cross. What will it profit to gain the whole world and lose your life?' (Mark 8.34-36)

Enriching yourself at the expense of others is not part of the message of Jesus, and doing that at the expense of your own christian family members is even worse. It is a sort of profit that costs you dearly.



Prosperity Gospel

Why wait for heaven to get your mansion?

James, in his letter, blames the believers that they treat the wealthy people in their church better than the poor. This is totally unacceptable, he says, for two different reasons.

On a practical note, the wealthy people, James says, are the people who make the life of the poor miserable. And on a theological note, James says that God has chosen the poor. They are his people.

The land grabbers said to Micah, that the idea of them being punished was just outrageous. 'God is a patient God. God is gracious. He loves us. He wants the best for us. He will not punish us, will He?'

As Christians we must be careful that we do not use those same arguments to make us deaf for the prophetic and biblical message that speaks to us. What are we doing for those who are poor in the Christian community?

The rich in Micah's days were convinced of their own uprightness. And if we define the Christian faith mainly as a pious attitude, a personal matter, a thing of the heart, unrelated to our life in society, we will be quite able to feel good as well.

How do you define the Christian life? Praying before your meal? Reading your bible every day? Going to church one hour each week?

If those things are the defining factors for being a Christian, then it is easy to not feel responsible at all for your society and for the poverty and oppression many of our fellow Christians suffer.

3. Warning and promise of healing

The wealthy landowners are told by Micah to prepare for judgment. Verse 4:

In that day they shall [...] moan bitterly,
and say, "We are utterly ruined;
[God] changes the portion of my people;
how He removes it from me!
To an apostate he allots our fields."



Those who enriched themselves at the expense of others, will lose their properties, Micah predicts. This is ultimate justice. God will give the lands they accumulated, to an apostate, an outsider.

The apostate is probably King Sennacherib of Assyria. He destroyed 46 villages of Israel when he moved his armies from Ekron in Philistea to Jerusalem, and the destruction of the armies passing through the land must have been enormous.

All those wealthy landowners lost what they had build up. This is the meaning also of verse 5:

Therefore you will have none to cast the line by lot
in the assembly of the LORD.

When Israel had entered into Canaan after the exodus from Egypt, the land was divided between the tribes by casting the lot.

Micah predicts disaster for Israel's landowners, but also that there would come a new day of redistribution of land. When the lots were to be cast again. That would create equality among the people.

But the guilty rich will have no one to claim their lot, says Micah. This means, that their families are decimated, or they remain in exile outside the land.

Exile is implied in verse 10, where Micah says:

Arise and go,
for this is no place to rest,
because of uncleanness that destroys
with a grievous destruction.

This is no place of rest. When Israel entered Canaan, the land was to be their place of rest. But because the wealthy had made the land unclean with their behaviour, God would no longer allow them to rest in his land. They would be expelled.

But there was a glimmer of hope. When God warns us, He does that with a view of the grace and hope that He offers at the same time. New beginnings are always possible.

Micah's warnings end with a promise - not for the wealthy but for a poor remnant that will be saved. Verse 12-13 speak of God assembling a remnant.

They will be gathered “as sheep in a fold, like the flock in an enclosed pasture, a noisy multitude of men.”

But then God will open a breach in the wall and those who are gathered can go out, with their king before them.

Some have seen this as a promise of a return from the exile from Babylon, because that is where Israel was going to.

Others have pointed at the events surrounding the invasion by King Sennacherib. He destroyed the villages around Jerusalem, and of course many refugees from those villages found safe haven in Jerusalem. The city became overfull and noisy.

Then Jerusalem itself was besieged. But by a miracle, the armies of Sennacherib suddenly withdrew, and then the poor villagers could leave Jerusalem again, led out of the breaches and gates by their own king Hezekiah.

But the language here is also full of messianic overtones. The New Testament often alludes to the gathering of the people of God, the remnant, and to us being the flock of Christ and Christ being our king.

I think all these ways of looking at this text in Micah are justified, because this is how God - who never changes - always acts for his poor children and against those who oppress his children. And his ultimate act for his poor children is through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

God loves all his children, so we, as his children, must really ask ourselves how we support God's other children. Or how our lifestyle as Christians here in The Netherlands exploits our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

You want cheap pants, or T-shirts, so your Christian sister in Bangladesh works in a sweatshop. We definitely want our coffee cheap, so your brother in Guatemala who picks that coffee can barely support his family.

So our challenge is to do some introspection. As a church community, but also individually.

How would Micah speak to us today, about our lifestyle, our work, our dealing with money, our dealing with our poor brothers and sisters among us, and worldwide?

Think about that and take that home as your personal homework. Read Micah 1 and 2 and ask yourself: who am I in this story.

Christ is your shepherd and your king. And in his flock, in his Kingdom, we cannot allow some to go hungry and to live miserably, while others live in great wealth. That is us.

This is so contradictory to the fact that we are one people, one nation, one flock of the Good Shepherd.

Amen