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Wisdom in the Scientific-Technological Revolution¹

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Text: Micah 6:8

We have gathered to celebrate a major milestone in your formal education; for some of you the final one, for others of you a stepping stone to further studies. In either case, this is an important achievement, worthy of celebration.

Today is a good time to pause and reflect. There is life after graduation! Take note that you are the beneficiaries of the latest and perhaps profoundest scientific-technological revolution of all times. Your generation stands on the threshold of unravelling the very secret of life itself. From the cloning of a sheep we have progressed to the cloning of an ape; and the cloning of humans has become a distinct possibility. The premature claims of sixteenth-century humanists that “Man can do all things” and that therefore “Man is the measure of all things” seem to have become reality. In politically correct terms this means “Humankind can do all things and humankind is the measure of all things.” This appears to be true in the cloning of the ape. Scientists added the gene of a jelly fish, with the result that the ape glows in the dark. It tantalizes the imagination: what may happen to our night life if this efflorescent benefit were passed on to cloned humans?

On a more serious note, the question arises how broadly the benefits of the scientific revolution will be shared. As one participant in the public debate put it recently, “If we do not take the time to thoughtfully examine the effects of our technological or scientific discoveries on all people and the environment, then we forfeit our responsibility as global citizens and stewards of this planet.”²

But where are we to find the wisdom, the moral vision, and the social conscience to adjudicate the benefits of the new discoveries? This is not a new question, and I have chosen a very old scriptural passage for our meditation. The text, attributed to the prophet Micah, is more than 2,000 years old.

Micah was offended by the corruption, the deceit, and the manipulations of his day. He accused the religious leaders of his community, the priests and judges, of using false weights and measures to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. Micah's criticisms did not endear him to those in high places. Tradition has it that he met an untimely death, pushed off a cliff.

But Micah's voice could not be silenced. Echoes of his message are with us still. They confront us, as his voice confronted his generation, with the question, "What does God require of us?" Does God desire sacrifices, burnt offerings, ritualistic, religious observances? Micah answered, No! No! No! Three times NO!

God requires that we...

do justice;

...love mercy; and

...walk humbly with our God.

These three imperatives, beautiful in their simplicity and clarity, encapsulate the meaning of the entire Old Testament Law. They shift the religious ground from the legalistic ritual focussed on pleasing God, to human relationships. Thus they remain relevant today, despite the "sea change" that separates us and our scientific culture from Micah's time period. True, we live in a society that prides itself in the rule of law; the separation of the judiciary from the executive power. We seem far removed from the days when justice followed the crude retaliatory norms of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." We enjoy rights and liberties which are the envy of the world. But social injustices continue.

Dr. Philip Harter of Stanford University School of Medicine has brought this home to us with his scaled down proportional model of the global village. Maintaining the same population ratios, his model of 100 inhabitants contains 57 inhabitants from Asia; 21 from Europe; 14 from the Western Hemisphere, and 8 from Africa. Eighty of the 100 inhabitants in this village live in substandard housing; 50 of the residents suffer from malnutrition; 70 are illiterate; only one has a college education. Six of the inhabitants live in plenty; the same six control 59% of the community's wealth. The six wealthiest residents are North Americans. At a recent council meeting of this community of 100, the six rich members vetoed an agreement they had signed earlier regarding

environmental clean-up; they argued that the agreement would diminish their wealth.

As I prepared this meditation, I was particularly struck by Micah's second imperative, *love mercy!* How fascinating that an Old Testament prophet should insist on tempering justice with mercy and compassion.

We tend to think of mercy and compassion as New Testament emphases, and rightly so. The story of the woman caught in adultery illustrates the point. The law required that she be stoned to death, a judgment and sentence still carried out in parts of the world today. But Jesus turned the tables on the self-righteous accusers by suggesting that the one without sin should cast the first stone.

Numerous other New Testament stories focussed on justice tempered by mercy could be cited. Perhaps the best known is the moving parable of the Rebellious Son who had wasted his inheritance in bad company and on substance abuse; he returned home and, against all hope, found a forgiving, compassionate father. Equally moving is the extraordinary parable of the Good Samaritan, a story of compassion which transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.

My point here is that the call to temper justice with mercy has received a universal application in the Christian story. Mercy and compassion were to serve as inoculations against religious and ethnic self-righteousness and bigotry.

As a historian I am familiar with the application of justice without mercy, best exemplified in those revolutionary mega projects that sought to eliminate social injustices, but lost sight of mercy and compassion. Take, for instance, the French Revolution, that mother of all modern revolutions, which centred on calls for liberty, equality, and fraternity. One of its luminaries, Maximilien Robespierre, as a young enlightenment lawyer had under the Old Regime opposed the use of torture and the death penalty. Yet this same Robespierre, during the course of the revolution, came to preside over the "reign of terror" that knew no mercy. Citing extenuating circumstances, Robespierre and his fellow members on the "Committee of Public Safety" suspended the due process of law in favour of revolutionary tribunals which dispensed with the calling of witnesses and made lack of enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause a crime. As the daily routine of executions turned into public entertainment, creative entrepreneurs marketed toy guillotines which, with the pull of a string, decapitated little dolls, permitting artificial blood to flow. Eventually the Terror devoured its instigators;

Robespierre and his supporters themselves became victims of the guillotine. By the time the Revolution — hijacked by Napoleon — had run its course, two million men lay slain on the battle fields of Europe.

I am not proposing a simplistic explanation for what was a complicated course of events, but I do suggest that there is wisdom in Micah's admonition to temper the pursuit of justice with mercy. Mennonites who, like my forebears, experienced that other mega project, the Russian Revolution, are all too familiar with injustices committed in the name of justice. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of the secret police, the Cheka, had once, like Robespierre, also opposed the death penalty.³

But we need not dwell on the failings of others when our own system is in the forefront of exploiting the earth's resources. Our short-sightedness will sooner or later come to haunt us. We need to heed Micah's call to do justice and also to love mercy.

Finally Micah admonished his people to "walk humbly with God." Justice and compassion we can identify as relevant today, but what is the meaning and relevance of walking humbly with God?

Neither humility nor walking with God are skills that carry much value in our society, in the university, or in the market place. Secular institutions are not designed to nurture humility or further a walk with God. Yet unpretentious humility is a saving grace in human relations; it frees us from self-deceit and narcissistic self-preoccupation. Humility is encouraged by an awareness of our dependence on others. None of us chose our parents, our genes, or the socio-cultural environment into which we were born. Our talents are gifts; their use circumscribed by the situation in which we find ourselves. To walk humbly implies a consciousness and acceptance of our limitations. This does not mean that we were predestined to become mere door mats for others. To walk with God — whatever it means — does not mean to walk on all fours.

But there seems to be a special caution in Micah's admonition to walk humbly with *our* God. On first consideration I found the notion of "our God" offensive, because so much religion hinges on the notion that "my God is greater than your God," which strikes me as the opposite of "walking humbly." But that is precisely Micah's point. To walk humbly with our God is the opposite of a power trip in the name of our God and our particular traditions. It is an invitation to respect other traditions. To walk with God is an invitation to walk by faith, to exercise our gifts on behalf of justice and mercy. It is to push the reference point

that gives us and our gifts meaning beyond human horizons. Humankind is not the measure of all things. Humankind is not its own creator.

Micah's reference point was the covenant-making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For most of us the reference point has shifted to the promised Messiah whose teachings, life, and death should teach us humility and make us a more inclusive community. Graduates, a humble walk with God acknowledges our own tenuous place in the fragile web of life, our dependence on a life-support system not of our own making, one that has been threatened by our arrogance, pretentiousness, and self-deceit.

May your generation advance justice in our land, that all may dwell secure; and may you bring to our world of strife a sovereign word of peace, that war may haunt the earth no more and desolation cease.

O day of God, draw nigh, as at creation's birth.

Let there be light again and set your judgments in the earth.⁴

Amen! So be it!

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the Convocation Service, April 2001, Conrad Grebel College.
- ² Michael Redfearn, teacher at St. David High School, as reported in *The Record*, Kitchener, Ontario, 6 April 2001.
- ³ Adam Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 420.
- ⁴ Robert Scott, hymn #88 in the *Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1970).