

Jesus will come like a Shepherd

He will stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth

The Messiah is not just a title given to Jesus it is also the title of an oratorio or musical setting composed by George Frederick Handel in 1741. This German born composer is famous for his anthems, oratorios and operas. I make reference to the oratorio entitled the Messiah as it has particular relevance to the first reading for today from the book of Micah as it has particular relevance to the season of Advent. There are three movements or parts to the Oratorio. Part one is focused on the themes of Advent, Christmas and the life of Jesus. Part two focuses on Lent, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, and, part three, which deals with issues surrounding the end of the Church year, addresses the theme of the end of time. "He shall feed his flock" is the title of one of the movements or pieces in part one. In this piece Handel captures the prophecy of Isaiah 40:1-3 which anticipates the return of the Jewish people who for seventy years lived as exiles in Babylon. Since reference to the shepherd feeding the flock is also highlighted by the prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, it is my intention to show the consistency with which God plans and executes divine care for people, especially those who are oppressed.

As a contemporary of Isaiah there are some similarities in the themes they address in their messages. One key difference, however, is the context in which each proclaims his message. Whereas Isaiah is based in Jerusalem, a city in the

south of Palestine, Micah is based in the north in a small rural town. Micah's concern was twofold. First he is concerned about the vulnerability of his small town as it is always overrun by military forces advancing on cities on the plain. Since military attacks at that time tended to go from the mountains to the plains, Micah's little town of Moresheth was always exposed to exploitative military personnel who would not just pass through the rural town, there was also incidences of rape, destruction of property, stealing of crops and the loss of innocent lives. Like Isaiah in Jerusalem, Micah was well aware of oppression perpetuated by persons with military might. In the city, Isaiah's message was focused on the oppressive nature of the economic power which caused major dislocation in the lives of people in the city of Jerusalem. Both men were therefore passionate that God sees and knows the acts of oppression being perpetuated by leaders in and outside the nation of Israel and both are convinced that God will intervene.

Micah's prophecy focuses on the fact that God will intervene and liberate his little community of Moresheth by coming to live among them as messiah. This messiah or liberator will focus on replacing the will to power, which exploits and oppresses, with the will to care and compassion. Those in position of power have been using their power to oppress and exploit others. Both men proclaimed the coming of a Messiah who will display care and compassion for all people. Power in this case will be used, not to abuse people, but, to provide security and peace for all. The metaphor the prophet feels best describes the ministry of care and compassion, which God will bring to the oppressed people, is that of a shepherd. Like Jesus of old, and George Frederick Handel of the 18th century, the metaphor

of shepherd means God cares for people and God will intervene in compassion to bring about the best in people and in their situations.

Last Sunday after Church some of us visited the Open Arms Drop-In Centre for the homeless in Kingston. In conversation with the men at the homeless shelter at least one was very clear his future does not reside in the care he is receiving from the centre. While he appreciates the care he receives his ambition is to move out of the shelter and use his skills and talents in order to develop and advance his potential. He sees his time at the shelter as a temporary arrangement so that in time, as well as with help from others, he will be able to make a positive difference in his life. He feels leaders in the private sector, with all the experience in business they have acquired over the years, could serve the homeless in positive ways. He expressed the view that, in addition to giving handouts to clients at the centre, business leaders could also take time to share with the predominantly men, key tips to establish and survive in the present business environment. With such advice, this man felt the men at the shelter will be inspired to make the best out of the opportunities available to them.

Two things stand out for me as I contemplate the ministry of care and compassion announced by Micah. First, just as Micah says the shepherd will bring peace and security, in the same way people today need a sense of peace and security to guide them in the daily affairs of their lives. People need peace, or a sense of integrity, to take on the challenges of daily life. One of the reasons so many persons are clamoring for the restart of the scrap metal trade, for example, which has the potential to generate income for over ten thousand persons, is precisely

because of the challenges a number of persons have had to confront on a daily basis. While it is true some of us have serious reservations about the trade being re-introduced, because of the potential destruction of private and public property, the ongoing recession in the global economy is wreaking havoc in the lives of individuals, families and communities. While it is true there is often no easy solution to some of these problems, nevertheless, it is precisely in these contexts that we must put our best minds together to provide the security which people need to live the abundant life promised by Jesus in John 10:10.

Closely related to security, in the message of Micah, is the message of peace. People desire to live in peace, as a sense of wellbeing, since this is indispensable for enjoying the fruit of one's labour. Having worked hard to achieve and acquire things over the years it is the will of the majority that there must be a space to enjoy that with which God has blessed us. Theologically, people desire to experience the glory of God and the "peace on earth, goodwill to all people," which the angel promised the shepherds, as is recorded in Luke's Gospel. Peace is the sense of mental, physical and emotional wellbeing which is both a gift from God as well as a state of human good, which most if not all people desire and long for. Micah reminds us this peace, whether of God or human beings, is not possible if a community is always threatened by internal and external forces which constantly threaten the very survival of the people. Today's advance of globalization, insofar as it tends to be insensitive to small economies like ours in Jamaica, can be just as exploitative as the military forces passing through Micah's town. Just as God promised to intervene in Micah's town, to deliver the people

from oppressive military forces, in a similar way, God will come to us in Jesus Christ at Christmas to bring anew to all that peace which the world cannot give.

Second, according to the prophet Micah, the shepherd who will come to liberate Israel, through acts of care and compassion, will relate to people in a personal way. Advancing armies, symbolized today by the forces of globalization, can bring about massive destruction in people's personal lives. While it is true both an army and the forces of globalization can act to bring about good in people's lives, there is a sense in which evil can sometimes work under the guise of these powers.

God's promised intervention in Israel, in a personal way, is testimony to the way God cares for people and will have compassion on them. In Israel's history there was a time when external armies, in the form of the Philistines, were accustomed to destroying the livelihood of God's people. God intervened in the person of King David who ruled over Israel for a number of years as God's shepherd. This shepherd, celebrated in the Psalm for today as one with strength and the capacity to lead people to victory, captures the spirit of David as liberator of Israel.

Jesus, as the incomparable shepherd of all people, is the one who will lead the new Israel, all the people of the world, in the path of peace and security. This shepherd demonstrates that God will intervene in the lives of people everywhere because God cares and will have compassion on all people. Luke's story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, in the Gospel reading for today, tells the story of the way God cares for people. Mary's visit to her cousin is a foreshadowing of the way the shepherd Jesus will exercise power. Power will be exercised through dialogue rather than through coercion. Power will be exercised through care and

compassion rather than through oppression and exploitation. Just as Mary went to Elizabeth and was able to find comfort in her company so Jesus invites people everywhere to come to him so they too will find comfort. In St. Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus is quoted as saying, “come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” Care and compassion for people, especially the poor and suffering, is central to the mission of Jesus whose coming we will celebrate on Tuesday. Let us like him practice acts of compassion and care as we make known his liberating presence in the world.

Just as Mary went to Elizabeth and found comfort in her company let us come on Tuesday, ready to celebrate the birth of our shepherd, the one whom God is sending us to bring security, peace and personal care and compassion to all who recognize their need for God. God comes to us in Jesus Christ to bring salvation. This salvation is both on the global as well as the personal level. At the heart of this salvation is the fact that God cares in the way John 3:16 puts it: “God so loved the world he gave his only Son so whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” In the name...