

4th Sunday of the Epiphany (1 February) 2026

Micah 6:1–8; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; Matthew 5:1–12

A life shaped by God

What does a life shaped by God actually look like? That's the question behind all our readings this morning, the thread that links them. The answers are deliberately counter-intuitive, overturning many of the things we assume about power, success, and righteousness. How does your life with God, my life with God, reflect what we hear? The passage from the prophet Micah opens like a covenant lawsuit: God's speaking, calling creation to witness, asking Israel to remember what God has done for the people in the past. God has done God's part – freeing them from slavery, leading them out of Egypt, giving them leaders, blessing them – but the people haven't done their part. They've failed in their basic duties towards God. What does God really want from them?

It turns out that God isn't asking for escalating religious performance. God doesn't want more sacrifices, more spectacle. The people are thinking in terms of commodities, extravagant offerings, but God doesn't want our stuff. God wants us. God isn't asking for something external, but for people to live in a particular way: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

This is not of course new – it's the basic message of all the prophets, of the whole Bible. Justice is about relational fairness, protecting the vulnerable, looking after those who are poor and powerless, correcting inequalities. Loving kindness is about covenant loyalty, the sort of loyalty that God shows to God's people and we need to show to one another. Walking humbly with God is less about lowering ourselves and much more about walking in step with God's character, living like God lives, and acknowledging that all life ultimately depends on God. It's about covenant not commodity.

What does a life shaped by God actually look like? Micah sets the tone: worship matters, and true worship is something shown in a particular kind of life, not in extravagant religious display. Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth, reminds them to look at the cross. Paul takes Micah's question and pushes it further: if God asks for justice, kindness, and humble walking, the cross shows us what divine humility actually looks like. It's easy for us to miss his point here: we've got so used to seeing crosses around – here, in a worship space, and for many of us as something we wear – that we forget how shameful a death it was. The Romans reserved this method of execution for criminal slaves and foreigners who weren't Roman citizens; it was designed to torture and to degrade. And it's this that Paul says is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." The Corinthians must've thought Paul had completely flipped here.

For those from a Jewish background, the cross was a stumbling block, a scandal. Crucifying someone was the ultimate exercise of power – not something to happen to the sort of Messiah they were expecting, a great military leader with privilege and reputation. To proclaim a crucified Messiah, as Paul did, was to talk nonsense. And yet this is what Paul calls the power of God. As for the Greeks – those steeped in the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – the cross was pure idiocy. The Greeks delighted in intellectual development. They looked for wisdom: reasonable accounts of the order of things; they valued rhetoric, the art of speaking, of saying sensible, intelligent things in a beautiful manner. And to them, the cross just didn't make sense – what kind of God would have allowed that? It's the sort of thing that (quite literally, if you look at the Greek) only a moron would want to hear. And yet this is what Paul calls the wisdom of God.

Now I have to confess that every time I read this passage there's something inside me going "hey, Paul! I'm a Greek on this!" And it's not just because I've read my share of Plato and a whole bunch of other Greeks. It's because I delight in the things of the mind: I enjoy cryptic crosswords, my favourite TV programmes are documentaries, and I want things to make sense, and get frustrated when they don't. So park me over there, in the corner with the Greeks. But Paul's saying to the Corinthians that philosophy will only take us so far. Trying to puzzle things out intellectually will only take us so far. And – for the Jewish-minded amongst us – wanting signs and miraculous demonstrations will only take us so far. And that "so far" isn't really very far at all.

What does a life shaped by God actually look like? It's one that has the cross at its centre. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the central event at the heart of the Christian story and it's the lens by which all human experience is seen afresh. The cross reveals the deepest truth about what God is like and changes forever how we relate to God and to one another. God has chosen to save the world through the shameful, powerless and apparently senseless death of the crucified Messiah, a crucified God, a God who's weak by worldly calculations of strength and power, and stupid by intellectual standards of smart. The cross upends what the ancient world valued: power, eloquence, status, lineage, success. Things that our world values too. And everything has to be re-evaluated in the light of the cross. Here is another kind of power, another kind of wisdom – something that radically subverts all the ideas that the society around Paul and the society around us have about wisdom and power. It turns our whole way of seeing the world upside down.

For a start, our traditional understandings of wisdom, power, and wealth need to be looked at again. The life God values may look unimpressive by worldly standards — and that's exactly the point. And if God can act through such apparent weakness, such seeming stupidity, then maybe we can do the same. Paul invites us into the same world as Jesus, a world in which the meek, the mourners, the poor in spirit are truly blessed. Like Paul, Matthew's Jesus calls attention to weak and foolish things, weak and foolish people, to confront his audience with a whole new way of seeing. A new way of seeing both those society rejects and the God we worship.

The Beatitudes show us God's character and the character of the kingdom breaking in through Jesus. These aren't commandments ("You must become poor"); they're descriptions of who God declares blessed. It's the very people who've been pitied or cast aside who can model for us how to be in relationship with God. And this means we no longer have to look down on, and no longer have to fear, powerlessness and foolishness, for these are the things in which God is revealed. The Beatitudes don't describe individual heroics but the life of a community shaped by Christ. This is a shared endeavour, not a solo effort. I don't know about you, but I'm relieved by that.

What does a life shaped by God actually look like? It's being part of a community in which the life of the Beatitudes makes sense. And that's a life of discipleship aligned with what God has already blessed: purity of heart, compassion, humility, peace-making. A life of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. It's a life which has the cross at its centre. What might living like that alongside each other feel like? How might this show itself in the week ahead? Who needs to see us practising justice, kindness, and humility more often?

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