

Knox Uniting Church Cluster.

Sunday March 1st 2026 – (RCL: Year A. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Service

Bible passages: Micah 6:6-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-21; Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSVUE)

“The goal posts have shifted!”

PREAMBLE

The title today is, *“The Goal posts have shifted”*. In the three readings we will look at today, we have words from the prophet Micah, the apostle Paul and Jesus himself - each in their own way talking about the shifting of the goal posts. The world as we know it so often wants us to score points by kicking goals in a certain way, and in a certain direction. But the way of Jesus presents us with totally different goals - unexpected, surprising, counter-intuitive goals, but deeply life-giving, rewarding and satisfying to the soul. Today (like every Sunday) we are reminding ourselves again how to realign ourselves with the Way of Christ, to live in a way that offers true blessing, in contrast to false messages of blessing that abound in our world.

MESSAGE

I know it's not footy season yet, but I want you to imagine you are at the MCG, with a big crowd watching an AFL match. Two teams battling it out, with the huge roar of the crowd every time a goal is kicked. Now, try to imagine another game being played at the same time, on the same oval, with different players, different umpires, different rules - and with the goal posts in completely different positions! Sounds like chaos doesn't it! But most people don't even notice this other game being played. A few, however, do notice and they begin to cheer when a goal is kicked through the alternative goal posts. They also notice something else rather strange about this game. Players on both teams seem to be helping each other win, and the umpire never gives out penalties, only rewards for fair play, sportsmanship and assisting the other team. Two very different games on the same field! A dominant game, and an almost invisible, subversive game.

This weird picture is actually describing the way the gospel of Christ is like a totally different, less obvious, subversive game, being played on the same field as the dominant world game – the one which seems to be attracting all the attention and support. This alternative game is radical and scandalous, and often very hard to understand or follow. And the goal posts are somewhere else entirely!

In our three scriptures today, we have three examples of just how *different* this game is. In each case we are presented with a way in which God totally re-writes the code for the game of life.

MICAH

Micah the prophet addresses the question, “What is worship?”

In Micah 6 it starts with God being frustrated with his people and asks for a ‘please explain’. Then in the verses we looked at, the people respond with the question, “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?” (v6). In other words, “We hear you are not happy with us, so what worship will please you?” The people are imagining that burnt offerings and all kinds of sacrifices will please the Lord. But then Micah himself chimes in with those well-known words, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (v8)

Micah totally re-frames worship. It's not about sacrifices at all. He tells them that if they really want to worship God and please him, then simply 'do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God'. That's like shifting the goal posts in the minds of the people.

It's not that they should abandon worship in God's house. Micah doesn't tell them to stop 'bowing down before the exalted God' as the people desire (v6). Nor does it mean for us that we abandon worship at church and just go and do justice, kindness and humility. It simply means that without justice, kindness and humility, all our worship services and other church activities are meaningless. It all must end up being expressed in justice, kindness and humility. As John van de Laar says, "*There is no division between justice and worship in the gospel*" (Sacredise)

PAUL

The Apostle Paul addresses the question, "What is wisdom?"

Paul is writing to the followers in Corinth, situated in ancient Greece. The Greeks of that time were very big on seeking wisdom. They loved to debate ideas, explore concepts, seek new insights and learning. It was therefore very highly regarded if a person was wise and intelligent.

But Paul totally re-frames the meaning of wisdom, saying, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (v20). He tells them that true wisdom is not to be found in the expected places. Rather, true wisdom is in the unexpected, even foolish places. He admits that the 'cross is foolishness' (v18) in the eyes of the world, but the cross is where the true power and wisdom of God lies (v24).

For the Greeks (and Jews as well), the cross, a symbol of weakness, suffering and defeat, could not possibly be wise. But Paul shifts the goal posts on wisdom. He's introducing them to a whole new game. And this must have been hard for them to get their minds around. I think it's still the same today. The kind of wisdom we discover in the gospels still flies in the face of the wisdom we encounter in human society every day of our lives.

JESUS

Jesus addresses the question, "What is blessing?"

This teaching in Matthew 5 comes at the start of the famous 'sermon on the mount' and we know this reading as the 'beatitudes'. Jesus is addressing his disciples and larger crowd on the hills near the western shores of Lake Galilee. Being 'on a mountainside' makes this moment consistent with numerous other moments in scripture of God's revelation on a mountain. So what does God say through Jesus on this mountain? He reveals the truth about 'blessing'.

The Greek word for 'blessing' is *makarios*. It can also mean 'happy' or 'fortunate' or 'having divine favour'. In the secular world of Jesus' time, *makarios* was something experienced mostly by the wealthy and elite, or even their Greek gods, all of whom had happiness because they didn't have any worries or stress. They had everything they needed. Luck and fortune went their way.

Jesus comes along and gives *makarios* a totally opposite definition. In the game of life, Jesus shifts the goalposts completely and says that luck and fortune is *not* true blessing.

Speaking of games, you may have noticed the Australian Open tennis is on at the moment. During the tournament, Novak Djokovic had some good luck and good fortune, when he was two sets to love down in the quarter finals against Lorenzo Musetti, when Musetti suddenly forfeited due to injury. After the match, Djokovic said, "I'm going to double my prayers tonight, for sure. Gratitude to the god for giving me this opportunity again". Now I'm not saying he shouldn't be thankful in that situation. And he was indeed very sorry for his opponent. But his good fortune only came at the cost of the misfortune of another. His blessing was due to another not having the blessing.

This reflects our society doesn't it. Blessing so often means, "I have what someone else doesn't have". Or, even worse, "What I have is the very result of others not having it". Into this mindset comes the teaching of the beatitudes, saying, "It's the people who *don't have* who are blessed". This is radical and shocking for people to hear. No wonder the sermon on the mount ends with the statement, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching" (Matt 7:28).

In the Kingdom of Heaven, real blessing belongs to the un-wealthy, the un-powerful, the un-healthy, the un-stable, the un-lucky, the un-fortunate.

We know these people don't we. Last week I shared with the community barbecue with our Ferntree Gully congregation, with a gathering of people who are challenged in life - the 'un-blessed', we might say. When I got home, Sophie asked me, "who were the people that came?". I wasn't sure how to answer. I didn't want to put a label on them. But I guess I was thinking they were a group of people 'un-blessed' by normal standards. And Jesus looks at them and says, "blessed are you". "Blessed if you are poor, or you mourn, or you are persecuted" - and the list goes on. "Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven."

So, for us, who are fortunate in any way, the call is to stand with and identify with those doing the hard yards of the human struggle – for in doing that, we soon realise we are just the same - we too are strugglers, and thus, we too are blessed.

CONCLUSION

What is worship? What is wisdom? What is blessing?

The dominant game being played around us, clearly plays from one kind of code. But if we look carefully with different eyes of faith, we can see the other game, where the goal posts have shifted, and if we listen with ears of faith, we can hear the invitation to be part of that game.

As people who have stepped into and begun playing that game, we should take heart, for we are blessed if we play it. Of course we have to stay focussed on our game and where the goal posts are, in case we are distracted by the other dominant game going on.

It seems to me that Micah has summed up the 'rules of our game' as well as anyone in the bible (or any other book ever written!) ever has: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8). That's where the goal posts are.