

Homily: Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
(January 30, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For any person who takes faith, religion and spirituality seriously Micah's question, "What does the Lord *want* from you?" is extremely important.

There have been millions of books written, sermons preached and speeches given each attempting to provide an answer to this question. Each one is a commentary about the spiritual life. Each one is a commentary about the commentator. The good ones hold in tension some foundational elements of our faith: scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

When our meditations on the spiritual life engage all four of these it becomes apparent that the purpose of pursuing God is not solely to discover God's will-something that is ever only partially comprehended by human minds – but we also discern something of ourselves along the way. The result is that out of these two discoveries we become equipped and obligated to pass on the fruit of our learning to others so that they may be encouraged and guided upon their journey.

For it truly is for the benefit of the other and not our own that we engage with the spiritual life as Christians. This of course is antithetical to the reasons why all of us get started on a journey like this. But early on in the Christian's pilgrimage of faith, we are confronted with the reality that what we are doing is not about us. It's not even *for* us.

I'll give you two traditions that encapsulate this truth and in turn have provided incalculable fruit for our journeys. The first is the Jewish tradition of the rabbis. Out of this have arose two major sources of spiritual literature. The first called the Mishnah is a

collection of commentaries about the Bible with an eye to applying what is there to the daily life of both the individual, but more importantly the community as a whole. The second is called the Talmud. It simply is a commentary on the commentary.

Upon examining these writings one discovers that the rabbis who penned them took seriously the call to follow in God's footsteps and thus show forth the holiness of the Holy One. In order to do this, every instance of human life: every part of the home, the society they lived in, the world and the soul were examined in the light of Scripture, the inherited tradition, the intellect and lived experience.

The Christian tradition finds its equivalent in the monastic life and the writings it inspired. In the early days of the Church, men and women left their worldly lives and headed – quite literally for some – into the desert. There they entered the great silence and in solitude began to wrestle with the three people: God, the Devil and the self. The aim was to discover something about all three.

Along the way they thankfully wrote down their discoveries so that the generations to follow would have an anchor from which to set sail. Their struggles produced writings that serve as light posts in the darkness; guideposts for our own desert wanderings. We would be foolish to ignore these saintly mothers and fathers thinking them old-fashioned, unenlightened and naive.

We should never be so presumptuous as to ignore that which has come before thinking that because of our modern knowledge we are better equipped to find God. The spiritual epiphanies of those who have come before are vital to a robust and faithful journey.

So what do we learn from these spiritual teachers specifically with respect to the question posed by Micah? Well, there is but one answer that resounds from these two traditions. That answer is, “Nothing!” What does the Lord *want* from us? Absolutely nothing!

God does not *want* anything, for there is nothing we have that God has not made. This is clearly expressed by God in Psalm 50, “I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills....If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine.”

Do you feel satisfied with this answer? Most of us don't. Most of us approach Scripture looking for the secret formula to life, the recipe card for success, the key to happiness and dare I say, the easy path to fulfillment.

In fact, I think most of the world treats the Bible (if they have anything to do with it at all) as one more self-help book, containing the latest personal-improvement techniques. And as with every other personal psychology manual, we are willing to pay any price to discover its secrets.

This is a mindset we just cannot shake as human beings raised in a consumer culture; one that tells us that stuff can make everything all right. If you have this or that you will be satisfied. If you give the right gift; make the right sacrifice you can appease your spouse, your boss, even your God!

It is a mindset the prophet captures in his first question that comes at the beginning of our text: “With what shall I come before the Lord...Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of

rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

This is, perhaps instinctually, the question that drives us to faith and spirituality. This is the paradigm humanity generally operates out of and as such becomes the lens through which the real question that is being asked by Micah is interpreted?

Did you notice that I actually changed one crucial word? I substituted *require* with *want*. The rhetorical question posed by the prophet is, "What does the Lord *require* of you?" not "What does the Lord *want* from you?"

I would wager that most people hear the latter question even as we read the former. This is not surprising in a society where nothing is free and everything costs. A world wherein you can get or get out of anything simply by satisfying someone's want.

But there is a big difference in asking what God wants versus what he requires from his disciples. Focussing on the former can only lead us to the conclusion that we can actually satisfy God with a sacrifice; that our obligations towards God and neighbour are appeased with the swipe of a card.

Yet Micah and those who have come before, teach us that this is not the case. God does not *want* anything from us. We have nothing in our possession that can win God over. Instead God *requires* an appropriate change *within* us as a response to his lavish gift of love.

A change that is so fundamentally transformative that it alters the very way we live amongst and interact with others. It is a way defined by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

The calling of God in the spiritual life as a Christian is an invitation from Jesus not just to “believe” but “Follow me!” It is a summons to walk in Christ’s footsteps, see through Christ’s eyes, love with His Sacred Heart and serve with his hands. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Beatitudes which Jesus gave in his sermon on the mount.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

The life of faith, one could say, is like being a sailor. Sailors, when they are on watch looking out for other ships, are taught not to look directly at the horizon because in the dimness, objects can be difficult to see against the backdrop of the horizon’s edge. Therefore they are taught to look slightly past to the sky just above.

In the twilight of faith the answers can be hard to see if you look directly at them. But they tend to come into view-like stars in our peripheral vision-if you look past them to the expanse of sky beyond.