

A Reliable Long Range Forecast

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of December 2000. The preacher is Ian Wyckart.

His sermon is entitled, A Reliable Long Range Forecast, and is from Micah, chapter 5, verses 2 to 5a.

Please be seated. Amen. Let's bow for a moment's prayer. Father, we thank you for the priceless gift of your word, and we ask for the further blessing of ears and hearts that are truly open to what you're saying to us this morning.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. This morning my subject is reliable long-term predictions. And what I'll be doing is dealing with prophecy, and then with a particular prophecy, the prophecy we heard for our first reading.

[1 : 14] This morning I say, in all truth, how good it is to see you all. How good to see and recognise everyone here in the church.

You see, it was rather different last July. I was preaching at St Mary's Caulfield, quite a large church, at my father's funeral.

And as I looked down the church from the lectern, I knew that I couldn't recognise anyone past about the fifth row of peers.

I was quite disappointed to discover later that amongst the people who'd come to pay tribute to my late father, one was a guide leader, a close friend of Wilma and herself.

She'd taken the trouble to drive over from Scoresby. Another one was a close personal friend from the Model Railway Club who heard of the funeral and decided to come over as well.

[2 : 18] And I didn't know, in his case, until two days later, that he'd been there. I just didn't see them. The problem was simply in my glasses.

At that time, I desperately needed a new prescription because where my left eye was focusing, the right eye was not. And that's why I couldn't see past, or couldn't recognise people past about the fifth row.

And for those of you who are wondering why it was that Wilma seemed to be doing a lot of the driving in those days, that was the reason, for her sanity and for the sake of other road users.

But now that I have these glasses, for the princely sum of something over \$400, at least, the benefit is I can see you all clearly.

It's certainly a matter of having the right glasses if you want to see into the distance. And certainly, that's the way it is in making long-range predictions.

[3 : 31] You have to have the right glasses if you want to see accurately into the future. Otherwise, you can be embarrassingly wrong.

For example, in 1996, there was an Anglican clergy conference in Canberra, and one of the guest speakers was a man who still is a noted business forecaster.

And in 1996, he predicted, blithely, to ask clergy, that Australia would have seven more fairly ordinary years, and in 1993, there would begin a golden age of prosperity.

The pyramid crash, the recession we had to have. In 1993, I was discussing with my father the fact that a lot of our politicians have never studied history because of our state politicians in the early 90s had known the history of the 1890s.

They would have seen the same disastrous economic conditions looming, and perhaps could have done something about it. So 1993 was not a time when the golden age began.

[4 : 53] I'm not sure if it's begun yet. Second example, at a certain metropolitan high school, a student there, who was a witch, told her fellow students that for \$2, she would give them the name of the horse that would win the next Melbourne Cup.

The said horse ran last. Well, it ran first, but at the wrong end, you might say. There are plenty of experiences like that.

Some of us have had those kinds of experiences. We've seriously expected that something would happen, predictably, in a couple of years' time, and it didn't. We don't have the right glasses for reliable long-range forecasting.

I want to put it to you that there are glasses available for long-range forecast, reliable ones, but they're in God's hands.

God gives out the glasses. And certainly, he gave such a pair to the prophet Micah. And that's what enabled Micah to see and proclaim the future events recorded in his prophecy, part of which was read to us this morning.

[6 : 15] There's a flip side to that. Just as for those God has called to a prophetic ministry, he has glasses to give them to enable them to see down centuries, many centuries, God has another set of glasses to hand out.

And these are the ones that he gives to those who are self-appointed prophets. Self-appointed prophets in the Bible are called false prophets.

Here what happened to one such man called Zedekiah, who was active, recorded in 1 Kings chapter 22. At one stage, a critical stage in Israel's history, this man was active and influential. What he didn't know, because he certainly didn't know God, that God said in heaven, who will entice King Ahab to go up to Ramoth-Bilead and fall in battle?

Then in heaven, one of the spirits said to the Lord, I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophet. And we know that, of course, Ahab met his death to Ramoth-Bilead because he believed the false prophet.

[7 : 47] What was happening there is described in some fairly grim words earlier in Micah in chapter 3, where God says to the false prophets, the ones he says who lead my people astray, therefore it shall be night to you without vision and darkness to you without revelation.

The sun shall go down upon such prophets and the day shall be black over them. The seers shall be disgraced. They shall all cover their lips.

By contrast, Micah then goes on to say, But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord and with justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.

That's the difference. The person who is called to a prophetic ministry is someone who is filled with the spirit and the power for the job. So to take a fairly astringent kind of line, I ask you to judge for yourselves what was really happening when Ellen White, in the mid-19th century, founded the Seventh-day Adventist movement with her prophecies that Jesus would return at that time.

And when nothing happened, she said she did her sums again and predicted the following year. And nothing happened. Or in our days, when some excitable Christian people predict, say, astronomical growth for their church or miraculous events, and none of them happened.

[9 : 34] We need to be astute and remember that false prophets eventually make a spectacle of themselves. But God has put the true prophetic spectacles on Micah.

And that's what enabled Micah to see forward seven centuries to a birth in Bethlehem. So we come in particular to today's reading on page 756 from the first part of Micah chapter 5.

One of the first things that strikes you about the reading is that out of nowhere, because it hasn't been mentioned before in this book, out of nowhere, Bethlehem is named.

God, as it were, turns his attention specifically to Bethlehem and says, But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, and all of the words of the prophecy about the Saviour.

So what's God doing here? In the midst, or hard on the heels of three chapters of some pretty grim judgment on a pretty difficult Israel, God decides, out of his grace, to reveal some more detail about an old promise.

[11 : 00] Now I say this is a gracious thing, a rather surprising thing, because the hearers, Micah's hearers, are all spiritually corrupt. Again from chapter 3, Micah, who was a contemporary of Isaiah, notes that in his country, its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money, yet they lean upon the Lord and say, surely the Lord is with us, no harm shall come to us.

That's really nasty spiritual corruption. But God speaks graciously about his promises into that scenario. He's being very gracious, just as he is with us.

He knows our failures, he knows our secret sins, and yet he still says to Christian people, my grace is sufficient. The promise I referred to is the one God made to King David in 2 Samuel 7.

The promise is this, David, your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever and your throne shall be established forever.

And in Micah chapter 5, God is unpacking that promise some more, so to speak. And so it's revealed here that just as King David was born in this insignificant village of Bethlehem, so a descendant of David is to be born there.

[12:48] And as the angel said, just before the birth of this descendant of David, he will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

So the promise is that David's throne will be established forever, that is, that there would be never lacked someone to be the ruler of Israel.

But in God's perspective, this meant there would eventually be someone who would never die, that is, someone whose death couldn't hold in the grave, his son ruling for eternity.

And in Micah chapter 5, as you examine the verses after verse 2, you'll find that God opens up his promise to show that this one is going to be a ruler, a shepherd, and our peace.

Three attributes. Now the ruler, well a ruler by definition is someone who is in control. How many of us know of households where we're told that such and such a person in that household rules the roost?

[14:17] But Jesus is one who is really in control. So much so that even through his death, the writer to the Hebrews says, he rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and Jesus delivers those who through fear of death have been subject to slavery all their lives.

things. In the ministry, you see perhaps more than most people, what's happening when people are dying.

You sit beside the bedside of many dying people and spend time with bereaved families. People and you end up having no doubt at all about the power of death and the power of the fear of death. The fear of one's own death and the fear of death of a loved one. But Jesus is foreseen here as such a powerful ruler that was able to be truly said by the writer to the Hebrews that he in fact had taken on and rendered powerless him who had the power of death.

One of the most moving examples of someone who had been freed from the fear of death, freed from the power of that, was a young woman, young mother, dying of cancer.

[15:53] I was called to her bedside at the Peter McCallum Clinic. To give her communion, she came from an Anglican church in a bayside suburb. But when I walked into that room, I saw that there's a well-worn Bible on the bedside table, a cassette player, some favourite Christian music cassettes, and I have to say that neither before nor since have I ever been so close to heaven that I was in that room.

Sound as it was, having communion with that lady, and she wept for the husband and children. She knew she wouldn't be seeing after a few weeks, she was obviously dying.

The thing was, she was ready to die. She had no fear of death. I believe heaven's doors were waiting for her. God said, this ruler we're told, in some translations is from the ancient days, in other translations we're told he's from the days of eternity.

Now to unpack that sufficient to say this morning, a good way to see that is that because he's from eternity nothing ever takes him by surprise, just in case you wanted.

You see, the cross did not take Jesus by surprise and following on from that, we don't need to be surprised or unduly shocked by the crucifying events that sometimes afflict us in our Christian walk.

[17:35] Secondly, we have a shepherd promised here. Now as you listen to the way this world thinks and reasons, as you listen to the TV commercials, as perhaps you read the How to Be a Successful This or That book, you hear the world saying no one who's an achiever really needs a shepherd.

If you're successful and not weak, then you can find your own way in life, you can find your own pastures, you can find your own shelter.

The trouble is, when people live like that, when people turn their backs on God and make their own way, this wandering leads all too often to being pierced with many a pain, to quote Paul's words to Timothy.

God's love. God's love. This offer of divine shepherding is really very good news to human beings and Jesus spells it out in more detail, most encouragingly in John chapter 10, beginning with his famous words, I am the good shepherd.

finally, Jesus is the one who is prophesied as being the one who will be our peace.

[19 : 03] to put some flesh on those bones, it's good to remember that this Jesus is the one who stilled the storm on Lake Galilee, stilled the storm at a time when everyone else on the boat had completely lost all peace of mind and sense of balance, when all balance and peace have gone overboard, no matter how bad the situation Jesus is still able to still the storm.

There's some very powerful words in Psalm 46, be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted in the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

Those words spoken into a Christian soul have the same power as the Saviour's words to the wind and the waves on Lake Galilee. You may recall that in that boat with the apostles, the apostle Peter was one of the men, one of the terrified men in that boat in the storm.

Hear his advice about prophetic words. Good note to finish up on, is reflect on what's been told of us through prophets like Micah about the coming Saviour and the notice we should take.

Peter says to his readers in his second letter, so we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed, that is, they've seen the Saviour.

[20 : 42] You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

May God bless us all with such a mindset about the words of his prophets. Amen.