Walking with Micah. . . as examples

What hymns can tell us

The character and development of Christian example is fertile ground for hymn makers: both the lifestyle modelled by Jesus and its implications for us in our contemporary world. Many of these hymns help us explore the nature of Christian example in relation to justice activity. Frequently they return, like the biblical passages they echo, to three significant characteristics:

- selflessness
- God in the unexpected moment, and – above all –
- expectations upturned

Selflessness

John Bell and Graham Maule sing of our predecessors in faith, "the saints", who saw God's kingdom "coming still / through selfless protest, prayer and praise" (For all the saints who showed your love, StF 746). That selflessness, we know, was inspired by the life and death of Jesus who pre-echoed the ultimate self-giving of Calvary in the act of washing his disciples' feet. This was a call to serve as we have been served, says Dominic Grant (O watcher in the wilderness, StF 667). The incident is retold in Jesu, Jesu (Kneels at the feet of his friends) (StF 249); while George Herbert addresses the "how" of selflessness in his poem, Teach me, my God and King (StF 668). He concludes that our task is to see Christ in all things:

and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

The unexpected moment

Meanwhile, Dominic Grant alerts us to expect the unexpected, using as his jumping off point the shock Moses experiences at the sight of an indestructible burning bush. Dominic writes of being turned aside from our routines and the need to "unblock our ears, unlock our hearts, / truly to hear your word" (StF 667). It's an injunction that complements the idea of Walking with Micah. . . as allies when, as Andrew Pratt says, the Christian task is to find God in our neighbour, wherever and whoever they are:

Love of neighbour sets us squarely
in the place where they now sit

(If we claim to love our neighbour, StF+)

Expectations upturned

The same theme is unpacked by Ruth Duck in her clever interweaving of the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25: 31-46) with Jesus' parable of the great banquet (Matthew 22: 1-14; Luke 14: 15-24): "Come, now, you blessèd, eat at my table" (StF 695). She answers the questions of Jesus' listeners ("When did we see you hungry and thirsty? When were you homeless, a stranger
alone?. . .") in sharply contemporary terms. Indeed, throughout the hymns of Ruth Duck's included in *Singing the Faith*, there is a recurrent desire to see justice done – not just in a final emergence of God's eternal dream for creation (There is a new heaven; there is a new earth, StF 738) but in the here and now.

Is this not also one of the messages we may take from St John's account of Jesus feeding a great crowd (John 6: 1-21), which Andy Dye draws on his sermon written for the Walking with Micah materials? Hymn writer Anna Briggs also reflects on this story in her hymn The crowd had listened to your word (StF+), which concludes:

Use us, your friends, to seek and trace
the gift that seems the smallest worth,
to shape the miracle of grace,
the love to feed a hungry earth.

Nowhere is the revolutionary "miracle of grace" more evident than in hymns celebrating the season of Christ' coming: Advent. It is there in Mary's hymn of praise, the Magnificat (Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!, StF 186) and in the Saviour's promises celebrated by Philip Doddridge: prisoners released, broken hearts and bleeding souls cured (Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes (StF 171).

An upturned, healed world is consistently envisaged, too, in the teachings of Jesus, not least in his sayings known as the Beatitudes, paraphrased by Kimberley Rayson in Beatitude (Blessed are the poor in Spirit) (StF+). She, along with other hymn writers mentioned above, is exploring examples of what it means to walk with Micah – examples offered by Jesus, "walked" by his followers ever since, and reimagined by hymnwriters for us to enact, in our turn, in the communities and nations of our contemporary world.