

## God's presence in the Christian worship service

### Micah 6, 6-8

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? <sup>8</sup> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly<sup>[a]</sup> with your God.

One day, the South African Adriaan Niewoudt watched his grandmother growing mold out of cream. "Grandma, why are you doing that?" Niewoudt wanted to know. Grandma promised Niewoudt that she could make a rejuvenating cream out of the dried mold. The unemployed Niewoudt was always open for new business ideas. And here he thought he had a brilliant business idea. He quickly grabbed a pen and a piece of paper and scribbled an advertisement for the newspaper. "The 7th Wonder of the World" was his title for Grandma's ointment. "New rejuvenating cream works wonders," he described the mold. Interested parties could get involved in a completely new business by growing the mold at home and sending the powder they produced to him, Adriaan Niewoudt. An initial package would cost €50. But for every package grown and sent back to Niewoudt, you got 10E back. Within weeks, the business would pay off and you could make a huge profit in the long run. Niewoudt's idea spread like wildfire in South Africa and the USA. Niewoudt later had not only his small room, but huge offices with many employees who were allowed to receive his powder and throw it in the trash. Because those in the know knew right from the start, like Niewoudt himself, that Grandma's cream was useless. Students, pensioners, the unemployed and completely normal families everywhere had filled their rooms with mold from Niewoudt's Grandmother. Niewoudt had thought up an ingenious but fraudulent pyramid scheme. Only when he ran away with his millions were people's eyes opened and Grandma's ointment recognized for what it was: useless mold. The people of Israel in our Bible reading also experienced something similar. They too had built a senseless pyramid scheme. They had burned animals. And a whole lot of them. The Israelites' sacrifices stank to the highest heaven. The system was simple but a scam, like every other pyramid scheme it was a fraudulent system. God's holy commandment had been turned into the opposite. People had been tricked into believing that success and a license to sin could be achieved automatically through the number of sacrifices. The whole thing was even called a religious service. But what was inside was anything but God. They were just fooling themselves and the people. In their hearts these people had nothing to do with God. They called it a religious service, but what they practiced separated people from God and was therefore idolatry! Self-interest, political power structures and personal success were the only goal of the whole thing. How can it be that we hold a religious service without God? As crazy as it sounds, such a thing really does exist. Because as soon as we humans are without God, the outlines of what is right and wrong become blurred. God's clear word is obscured and covered with the haze and mist of human arbitrariness. Usually it doesn't take long before our worship becomes fundamentally evil. Something like that happened in Israel too. Someone came up with the idea of sacrificing not only livestock, but one's own children. In their opinion, that would be even more effective and would conjure up even more success in both private and business life. This had already been seen among the pagan peoples and copied from them. What a mortal delusion! They

wanted to sacrifice children for their own stomachs and their own pleasure! This is not only nonsense, but fundamentally evil. And we can see from this how terrible it is when we humans pervert and distort worship. This kind of thing happens again and again. The desert wanderer, Mohammad, was initially right when he pointed to the one God who created the world in a polytheistic environment. But, because he wanted to build a political and military system, he used this living God as a tool. So he came up with the brilliant idea of promising his warriors heaven if they died in war. The idea worked brilliantly. Mohammad's warriors were fearless and he was able to conquer almost the entire world with his Islamic warriors. Mohammads system is a perfect military model. But something like that cannot be called a religious service! We can still see today how terrible this deceitful statement can be. To this day, thousands of people die because some misguided people blow themselves up, causing many victims. In the Iran-Iraq war, the whole thing was even refined with a pedagogical method. The children were sent to certain death with a key around their necks. With the key, they were promised, they would be able to open heavens doors. God wants to save us from such delusions and thus commands us by the Words of Micah:

**what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly<sup>[a]</sup> with your God.**

What a wonderful triad God gives us here? The inspired words of Micah shine into the darkness and lift the dark clouds of deception and human arbitrariness. The clear sun of God's word and the bright light of his will remain. We should hear it again and again. It all depends on this triad:

Keep God's word, practice love, be humble.

We should hear again and again that our worship and everything we do begins with God and his word. . It is said to you, O man, what you should do: "Keep God's word." We must not trust in ourselves and our own strength. We must not belittle the holy things in our midst in our heads as mere human tradition and formalism. When something like this happens, we are quick to concentrate on unimportant things. Then there is nothing left to do but make an unholy war over little things. For example, we argue about what clothes we or the pastor should wear, what color the church walls or windows should be, where the children should be during the service. Oh, the examples of senseless arguments in the church are endless. Meanwhile, love for the many people who do not know God is growing cold. Meanwhile, people are dying spiritually and physically. That cannot be right. When we gather here in God's house, we hear God's word and not the word of man. All our strength and all our actions belong to God and not to ourselves. The church is not dependent on human actions and wills, but because God wants it. As soon as we cover or conceal this fact, the outlines of what we should be become diffuse and unclear. We can no longer see where the path leads. There is then nothing left to do but chase after political, social and other influences. The end result is that we ourselves no longer know why we gather here for the service. We cannot then inspire others at all to hear God's word and live by it. The bright light of the gospel and the joy that we get from God's word becomes gloomy and dark. Then we become paralyzed in our actions. Love for our neighbor is no longer seen as a priority. It is unbelievable but true that today we are back where the Israelites were back then. There are many children among us who no longer have a real home in their families. Meanwhile, representatives of the church stand up and claim that God's commandments are contemporary and can be changed. And once God's word and will are questioned, terrible things follow and we are drawn into the vortex of lovelessness. The word of God wants to create clarity. It wants to

shine into our hearts. It also wants to go out into the world, where there is so much deceit and nonsense. It wants to create clarity there. The words of God resound bright and clear.

Listen to God's word and practice love, Micah tells us.

And finally, in his triad, he lets us enter the courts of the living God again. We should be humble. Being humble does not mean that we have an inferiority complex, but can mean that we simply lean on God's strong shoulders and draw on his strength. We do this when we pray: "Your kingdom come" or "Hallowed be your name". Jesus taught us these words so that we should pray that God is in us and in our church. Dear congregation, pray for us! Pray for the pastors, for the bishop, and for all the people in the church, that they preach God's word and not the word of man. But also pray for parents and all those who have responsibility, that they speak to their children as they themselves are... God's children. Satan wants to keep us away from God with all his might. So pray! And if we do succeed in something, we don't need to let the success stick to us. Instead, we need to step before God's throne again with great thanks. It is He who made everything. It is He who works in us. It is He who not only gives us a way for day to day living, but also the strength to do so. We need God's strength. We live from it. That is our true worship! Thank God! Amen.