The readings describe the experience of everything going wrong – the prophet Micah bemoans the state of his society. This chapter follows soon after the well-known verse of Micah 6.8: “and what does the lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” It’s apparent that this is not what is going on – that all is going to wrack and ruin, the land is in the hands of the unfaithful, the judges and officials are bribed by the powerful. Friends and relations are turning on each other, and no one is to be trusted. In the midst of this apocalyptic scene, the prophet alone, it seems, looks to the Lord, and waits faithfully for the God of his salvation to hear him.

And from this place of faith, he first acknowledges his own sin, his responsibility for the state in which he finds himself, and then anticipates God’s redeeming action and restoration not just of himself, but of the whole of the community – in the midst of a fallen world. Those who have looked on – especially Babylon, great oppressor, referred to as ‘her’ in v.10, saying ‘where is the Lord your God?’, will find their answer.

The state of the world, and subsequent hope for the future, is clearly attributed first to the people’s sin, and then to God’s forgiving mercy and restoration.

We can understand this lament as a search for meaning – why is this happening? It is the age old question, if there is a God, and he loves us, why are these terrible things overwhelming us?’ The prophet’s answer is clear: it is in the people’s sin, which have separated them from God and his loving purposes. But God’s mercy will break through: ‘Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.’

We see the same theme in the letter of James. The rich are warned that they will get their come-uppance – there is simply a presumption that they are rich through their oppression of others. Those who are suffering are urged to bear it patiently, and all are encouraged to seek God and his purposes. And in the midst is a thread that suggests that healing and hope are linked to confession and forgiveness. This is a delicate area, and probably not amenable to a few minutes at Evensong – but there are clear links between our actions and their consequences, which, whilst not by any means explaining everything that befalls us, are not irrelevant. Sin has its own results.

This week has seen considerable discussion of what is and isn’t sin in the media, and who is the right person to judge. With the advent of ‘gay’ or ‘equal’ marriage this weekend, the church has found itself flailing around trying to respond – and often, I fear, getting it wrong. It’s a serious question, of course – and I do believe we should have something to say. But what? Well, I hesitate to say anything because time does not allow to address the subtleties of the debate – but to say nothing seems to me irresponsible, especially with the challenging co-incidence of this news and Mothering Sunday, which is associated with more traditional images of family life.

If God has set out a pattern for our relationships, it’s important for us to follow that, if we can. I can understand those who say that God has made humanity such that men and women are drawn to each other, and have children, and that to sanction or bless any other form of relationship, not matter how well intentioned, is to somehow encourage people to live in a way which falls short of God’s will and best purpose for humanity. On the other hand, it’s clear from the rhetoric that’s being used that this argument is frequently based on a particular reading of scripture which is not universally held. I listened to a Christian woman on the radio explain that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of the homosexual acts of the people there: that, to me and others, is simply a misreading of the message of the passage, which is about abusive behaviour towards the stranger. There are many different readings of scripture, and they leave open the possibility, in my mind, that God would bless loving, committed and supportive relationships between those of the same gender and would therefore want the church to do the same. It’s not cut and dried either way. What is clear throughout scripture is that God is on the side of the
oppressed, and the passages which speak so powerfully of the consequences of sin, such as we’ve heard this afternoon, are passages which serve as warnings primarily to the rich and powerful.

The debate – if that’s not too generous a word for the expression of views in a way which does not suggest that much listening is taking place – can become confused by the word ‘marriage’. Marriage has been understood for millennia as the union of a man and a woman, and to suggest that it can now be the union between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, might be seen as to fundamentally alter what marriage is. As is so often the case, I can see either side, and would be happy to discuss it – but I’m less happy to seek to make a definitive statement outside of a dialogue (which is hard in a sermon!).

What we are called to do above all else is to love others (and ourselves – for this may be about us, too) with the love of God – and to seek his best will and purpose for all both within their individual lives, and in the part they play in the wider society. God starts from where we are, with his message of grace, and offers hope to all.

Is the advent of ‘gay marriage’ an example of the sort of moral collapse described in the prophecy of Micah, or implied in the call to repentance of the letter of James. I would urge caution before making that sort of accusation. Let’s listen, and look to examining ourselves rather than others, and – like the prophets – leave the judging to God.