

THE PROPHET'S CALL (7) HABAKKUK: DISPUTING WITH GOD

INTRODUCTION

There's no story of the prophet or his call to be discerned in Habakkuk's prophecy, unlike Jonah last week, or Amos or Hosea whom we dealt with previously. All we can say about him is that the mention of the Babylonians probably makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah, around the end of the seventh century/beginning of the sixth BC.

It's a short book, but it contains a verse that St Paul makes much of in the New Testament. In fact, Paul derived his message of salvation by faith alone from his interpretation of this single verse from Habakkuk. It was the last verse we read: *the righteous will live by faith*. Whether or not that verse in its original meaning can bear the weight of Paul's application of it is another matter. As we shall see, the verse has more to do with being faithful than exercising faith, although of course the two meanings are closely related.

Another preliminary comment I would make is that Habakkuk's message could very well have supplied the Biblical basis for my sermon last Sunday morning when we asked why a good God doesn't stop bad things from happening, because that is exactly the same question that Habakkuk asks. But more of that shortly.

What impresses about Habakkuk is that he had the courage to challenge God and the apparent ways of God. And it was out of that challenge that his call to be a prophet arose.

THE COURAGE TO DOUBT

Habakkuk discerned in his questioning a divine call to speak God's word to a generation that was losing both faith in, and patience with, God. Habakkuk was himself a member of that generation, and because he dared to doubt he has left for himself a name that speaks to us across the generations.

In any case, it seems to me that Habakkuk is very much a prophet for our generation. Like him, we also live in times when faith is at a low ebb. When we look out on the world and see its problems and disasters, its great and growing needs, and the play of international power politics, we also may wonder what God is up to. So maybe the answer that God gave Habakkuk is one that we can take and apply to the very different world in which we live.

So let's look at the book in greater detail. It begins by describing the book as *an oracle* that the prophet *received*. It was something given him by God. But what he was given at the first was doubt. That doubt may be a gift from God may surprise us. We normally think of the gift of faith, not the gift of doubt. But Habakkuk's doubt was God's way for him to win through to a deeper understanding and a surer trust. Don't let us ever be suspicious of doubt. Yes, it brings the risk of taking us away from God, but it may also

lead us nearer to God, and may even be the cause of our receiving a call from God, as it did in Habakkuk's case.

So Habakkuk voices his complaint to God. Prayer doesn't seem to be working! God does not appear to be listening. Like several of the Psalmists, he cries out, *How long, O Lord, how long?* It looks very much like a case of

DIVINE COMPLACENCY?

in the face of human suffering. Not only are the heavens as brass, seemingly impervious to prayer, God also appears to be sitting on his hands and doing nothing about the widespread violence and injustice that Habakkuk complains about. This God, apparently, is failing to stop bad things happening: *destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.* The structures of society also seem to be no defence against the increase of evil.

But now it's God's turn to speak. And the answer he gives to Habakkuk's questions seems a terrible one. He is going to raise up the ruthless, rapacious Babylonian army and it will sweep across the face of the earth, laying waste to everything in its path.

This won't do for Habakkuk. Oh, no! He raises his voice again to challenge God's decision. Yes, he knows that the Babylonians are the instrument of divine punishment, but the outcome is going to be far worse than the situation that called it forth. The effect of the medicine will be worse than the condition it was meant to put right.

Habakkuk hasn't finished, though. He has more to say. He tells God that by executing divine judgement in such a way God is acting out of character. God's eyes are too pure to look on evil. Surely God does not approve of the way the Babylonian armies behave so violently? They are even more wicked than the people God wishes to punish through their agency. There's something not quite right here in what God proposes to do.

So Habakkuk voices his complaint, and then waits to see what God will say. He determines to *stand at his watch and station himself on the ramparts.* He will *look to see what God will say.* He will also look within and reflect on his own response to the questions he has raised about God's ways and God's character: He will look to see *what answer I am to give to this complaint;* he wants to know how things look from

THE DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

We don't know how long was the night during which Habakkuk stood on watch. Like a sentry on the town wall looking for the first glimmerings of dawn, he waits. Then, at last, out of the deep silence and the darkest night there comes an answer. The Lord speaks. He tells Habakkuk that an answer to his questions will be given. The future belongs to God, not to the violent despoilers and the perpetrators of injustice. Wrong will be righted, but it will happen in God's time, not ours: *the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; for it will certainly come and will not delay.*

This is the same message that we find in the teaching of Jesus and in the rest of the New Testament. I nearly chose as our other reading the passage from the Letter of

James that enjoins us to be patient until the coming of the Lord, but in the end I chose the reading from Hebrews which speaks of perseverance in the midst of trials, and reminds us that if we maintain our confidence it will be richly rewarded. We will receive what God has promised. The new heavens and the new earth will be established. This is a confidence based on the work of God in Christ in giving him up to die for us and raising him again to life, victorious over sin and death. To support this message the passage from Hebrews also quotes the verse from Habakkuk about the righteous living by faith. Actually the prophetic word is more about being faithful than having faith. It's about

FAITHFULNESS DESPITE THE DOUBT

Like Habakkuk, we also may have to live without having any answers to the puzzles and perplexities of staying faithful to the vision entrusted to us by God in a world that rejects God.

The trouble is, we live in a culture that expects answers will always be found. Science has been so phenomenally successful in supplying solutions to the problems we come up against that we can't cope when there are apparently no answers. But faith has to coexist with doubt. It lives with mystery. It accepts that there are loose ends that cannot be tied in. It's a real test of how faithful we can be to the call of God on our lives.

One of the greatest mysteries is why God permits evil. It was a question that Habakkuk wrestled with. His prophecy continues after the place our reading left off with a series of woes against ungodly behaviour. Crime, the exploitation of the weak by the powerful, excessive consumption, the misuse and abuse of alcohol, and idolatry all fall under prophetic condemnation. Some might think that nothing has changed in two and a half thousand years. Is the damage such ungodly behaviour does to the fabric of human society and the destruction of lives within in justified in the light of the coming kingdom of God and the great reversal it will bring about? Why has not God intervened sooner to put a stop to all this wrong, to limit the damage and put things right?

That's the same question Habakkuk asked earlier on, and the answer must be the same. There is an appointed time, but God's timetable and God's timescale are not ours. So patience is called for. Faithfulness to the vision must be maintained.

And so we come to the last chapter of Habakkuk's prophecy. It consists of a hymn of praise to the glory and majesty of God that meant to be set to music. Like Job, Habakkuk knows that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, but that also, come what may, the name of the Lord is to be blessed.

CONCLUSION

And finally, there is this noble affirmation of faith that closes the book: *Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls....*

The situation sounds dire, does it not? There's no food. Starvation is staring Habakkuk and his fellow Israelites in the face. In a subsistence agricultural economy there's no other source of food when the crops fail. Lament might have been the appropriate

response. And, indeed, as I suggested last Sunday morning, lament is often a faithful and godly way of responding to disasters or other terrible occurrences that cause human suffering.

But that is not how Habakkuk wishes to respond. His is the response of *nevertheless*. So he continues, in spite of all that he fears, *yet*, he says, *I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour*. This is a saying on a level with Job's declaration, *Though he slay me, yet will I trust him*. This is also the New Testament's *Give thanks in all circumstances*. What inspiring words these all are! And what confidence in God they both express and inspire!

And, that, is where we must leave it. The message of Habakkuk is all about having confidence in God, even when things are going against us and times are hard. Having confidence in God is also the theme of the new YBA strategy that Jane has drawn up. Having confidence in God leads to confidence evangelism, confident spirituality, confident leadership and confident discipleship.

So may we all learn, from Habakkuk and from the rest of the Bible what it means to be confident in God. For if we are confident, we will also remain faithful. We will be those who are in a right relationship with God because in the midst of a generation that is unfaithful we continue to live by our faithfulness. Amen