

Habakkuk 1:1-14, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-0; Luke 17:5-10

It's not very often that we have Habakkuk as one of our readings so, intrigued, I decided to do some exploration. Habakkuk – not even useful in scrabble since it's a proper noun and has three ks (scrabble has only one k) – was one of the minor prophets, living around 600BCE. It's a short book of three chapters, and not all that easy to read. And the two short extracts that we have – the first four verses of Chapter 1 ending "therefore judgement comes forth perverted", followed by the first four verses of Chapter 2 – could probably have done with the rest of Chapter 1 to make more sense for us.

But we can at least see clearly that the situation facing Habakkuk, and the people of the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem where he was based, was desperate: violence, destruction, strife, contention, lawlessness, lack of justice, the wicked surrounding the righteous. No wonder Habakkuk begins, "O Lord, how long shall I cry to you for help, and you will not listen? Or cry 'Violence!' and you will not save?"

But in the verses that follow, which we don't have, God does reply. However, His reply is hardly reassuring. On top of what was already going on in Judah and Jerusalem, and perhaps the reason behind it, was the fact that the Babylonian empire was about to invade. And, indeed, we know that that happened in 597BCE, and the people of Judah and Jerusalem were taken away into exile in Babylon for 70 long years, Habakkuk included perhaps. A desperate situation indeed.

And, while that is all ancient history, two and a half millennia ago, it's not all that hard to relate it to today and the continuing cries of the fearful and oppressed in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world, and to oppressed minorities in countries where far-right politics is dominant including the USA, and where there is the fear of it becoming dominant including in our own country. "O Lord, how long shall I cry to you for help, and you will not listen? Or cry 'Violence!' and you will not save?" So, although a long time ago, it does have application to us and the world we live in.

But then we need to turn to God's further reply to Habakkuk at the beginning of Chapter 2: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." And this is, of course, although written in pre-Christian times, the ultimate Christian hope – it is the same God speaking, after all. And this is the ultimate Christian hope for all who are oppressed, and for those of us who are not oppressed ourselves but long for the end to oppression, and the reconciliation of all things. It will happen. God will bring it about. There is still a vision. Write it in big letters!

Well, that may and should give us ultimate hope, but what about in the meantime, while oppression continues and the vision definitely does tarry in being fulfilled? And our psalm this morning speaks into that situation. For there too there are evildoers, evil schemes and these are seen to prosper. But for those who, as in Habakkuk's time, long for justice and cry out "How long?", the psalm provides a whole series of positions and actions to take:

Trust in the Lord; be doing good; dwell in the land; be nourished with truth; delight in the Lord; commit your way to Him; be still before Him; wait for Him; refrain from anger and abandon wrath so as not to be moved to do evil. And then the promise: “those who wait upon the Lord shall possess the land”, words echoed by Jesus in the sermon on the mount, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). The same vision of things coming right is here in the psalm as it was in Habakkuk.

But you may have noticed that most of what the psalmist calls God’s people to ‘do’ is actually passive: trusting in the Lord (in other words, leaving it to Him); being nourished with truth; being still before Him; waiting for Him; refraining from anger so as not to do evil. There is really only one call to positive action and that is to do good, although dwelling in the land is probably a mixture of being passive and active.

And while incredibly frustrating to those of us who are activists at heart, this has to be part of our response as God’s people: learning to wait, learning to be still, learning to trust, and so on.

But then, as we’ve seen, there is an active side to the response required of God’s people as well. And that comes through most clearly in the second part of our gospel reading, where it is pretty clear that one way Jesus tells us to think of ourselves is as slaves or servants. And for slaves and servants there is no rest! When you’ve finished ploughing or tending the sheep, and you’re absolutely exhausted, well it’s simply time to cook dinner and serve it. Only then can you expect to have dinner yourself. I expect, for church wardens, PCC secretaries, Treasurers and others, particularly in a period of Vacancy, it can feel more than a bit like this!

But perhaps it’s the old adage that applies: pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you. And when the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith, or perhaps even grant them faith (the Greek word can, apparently, mean either), and Jesus challenges them, and us, to have faith even the size of a mustard seed, it should then be a faith which is both passive – trusting, being still before, waiting on God – and active – doing good, dwelling well in the land, and serving God in whichever way He requires of us.

And it’s faith like that, both passive and active, which holds on to and works towards the vision of things eventually coming right, of justice triumphing, of violence coming to an end, of the meek inheriting the earth, of the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

And so, our prayer this morning might be, ‘Lord, grant us and increase in us faith like that’.

Amen.