

27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)

When Habakkuk wrote his prophecy, from which our first reading was taken, in about the year 600 BC, he was writing in a climate of fear and impending invasion: ministering to King Josiah in the Kingdom of Judah, Habakkuk interpreted the Babylonian invasion against his people as God's judgment for their spiritual laxity, and as a means of recalling them to the ways of God. But, in terms of prophetic style, Habakkuk is something of an anomaly, because the prophet begins by questioning God's inaction, rather than by immediately relating a divine oracle. He says, 'O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.' Words that will have resonated with many individuals and communities throughout Jewish and Christian history; and sentiments that seem particularly pertinent today.

One should always be cautious about applying biblical texts to contemporary circumstances, because they were written for specific communities and situations in the past: prophecy was often written retrospectively – after significant or catastrophic events had taken place – with the intention of making sense of what had happened, and of discerning spiritual consolation and guidance for the future; thus it is the spiritual aspect of prophecies such as that of Habakkuk that speaks to us today. I should think that his words, his exasperation

and cry to God, must feel particularly apposite to our country's Jewish population, which has suffered a grievous terror attack in the past few days; likewise, Habakkuk's entreaty might equally be found on the lips of our starving and persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ in Sudan and Nigeria – genocides that go unchallenged, because the suffering of Christians isn't of interest or gain to our political class or liberal elite. And, looking around us, we too might make Habakkuk's words our own, as we look upon a society that is divided by injustice, inequality and the politics of grievance and envy, to say nothing of the spiritual consequences of our nation's near-wholesale rejection of God.

And so, Habakkuk's frustration, his *cri de coeur*, and diagnosis of the ills of his people, are far from being pertinent to his age alone: rather, they speak to us and to our experience in such a way that they help us to set our own concerns and circumstances within the complex and messy reality of the human predicament; just as he gives us the basis for diagnosing the root cause of the ills that beset our age and generation; and points us towards their remedy.

One of the problems with the contemporary imagination is that we have lost the sense of the reality and power of sin and evil: the optimistic progressivism of Western democracies of the late C20th has deluded us that human progress can breed evil out of us by means of technocratic solutions to our problems; and that we can perfect ourselves without reference to God, and thus engineer a better world by our own ingenuity and effort.

But this liberal trajectory has run its course, because it cannot provide convincing answers as to why evil actions, such as the terrorist attack in Manchester, continue to diminish and threaten to destroy us. S. Augustine, C5th Bishop of Hippo in north Africa, taught that evil was the absence of good; and other theologians and philosophers have looked to a malign supernatural force as the source of our evil impulses and desires. We must hold both to be true – remember that the Devil’s greatest deceit is to convince us that he doesn’t exist. Evil and sin are real, whether they are manifest in acts of terrorism or in telling a lie; and we Christians need to accept evil as an intrinsic part of life if we are to have any chance of combatting it with God’s goodness, truth and grace.

And so, this brings us to Habakkuk’s solution for coping with the violence, destruction and evil that so pervade our common life, and lead us into sin: he tells us that ‘the righteous shall live by faith’. It is faith – our trust in the goodness of God, and our conviction that he loves us, and is in control – that helps us to make sense of seemingly random and indiscriminate acts of violence, the unfairness of suffering, and the ubiquity of injustice; just as it is by faith alone that we are given the insight and impetus to bring about the change that our world so desperately needs, as we seek to live and act in such a way that, in the power of God’s grace, we bring light to places of darkness, hope to those in despair, and offer the world around us a vision for human flourishing that is not dependent upon our skill or the inevitability of progress; but wholly upon God.

The people of Habakkuk's day had forsaken the practice of their faith, and quickly forgotten the spiritual renewal that they had undergone under Josiah's kingship. Habakkuk believed that God had used the Babylonian invasion, not to punish them, but to wake them out of their complacency, and to recall them to the only way that could lead them to true peace, prosperity and fellowship with God.

And, whilst I am not suggesting for one moment that God is using the many atrocities and injustices that we see committed daily around our world either as a punishment of the individuals affected or as a means of collective admonition, I do believe that we Christians need to open our eyes, and to discern the signs of the times; recognising with honesty and humility that many of the ills that we face are a direct consequence of our society, and the West, having become deracinated from the bedrock of Judaeo-Christian faith and morals, which have inspired our best endeavours, and grounded us in an ethical framework that has taken seriously a realistic view of sin, forgiveness and redemption; and offers us hope and transformation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Life will only going get better for us and for our world when we return to the practice of the Faith of Jesus Christ, and take seriously our obligations to God and our neighbour as set out in the Gospel. It is for the Church to lead the way; not by hectoring people about political hot potatoes, but by proclaiming the Gospel of salvation. God does indeed hear our cries for peace and justice; but he needs our co-operation and commitment if he is to answer them. Amen.