

25th Feb 2024 – Lent 2 – Pathways of Prayer – Habakkuk 1:2-7,3:17-19 ‘The path of social justice’

Indulge me if you will for a moment. I don't know if any of you watch the classic TV Quiz Show Family Fortunes. You're probably aware of the format, even if you don't: 100 people are asked a question, and you have to guess the five most popular answers. To be honest, we use a version of it in our regular church quiz nights, not least because it's the sort of quiz question where everyone gets to be involved. But just imagine for a moment that you and your family are appearing on the show. You've done the patter with host Gino and now the lights are on you. The audience hushes and the question is read out: name 5 things you know about the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk...

Let's be honest, nobody knows anything about Habakkuk. Certainly not 100 people interviewed in the street, but if I was to ask 100 Christians to name 5 things – or anything – they knew, I bet 98 of them couldn't tell me even three. Most of us can't even spell his name – is it 2 Bs and one K or one B and two Ks. And which two prophets sit either side of him in the bible index? So, today is a great learning opportunity – I must confess it's breaking new ground for me. I've written more than 500 sermons and 650 daily reflections, and I've quoted Habakkuk twice but never given him my full attention. (And, for the record, it's one B and two Ks, and you'll find him between Nahum and Zephaniah, two other prophets that wouldn't do too well on Family Fortunes.)

So, let's start with some background. **His name is significant – it means literally ‘one who embraces’,** in fact it's a wrestling term which in colloquial language would mean something like ‘Clinger’! David Pawson comments: ‘Though his name is not especially pleasant, it accurately describes his relationship with God as it unfolds in the book. Habakkuk was a man who clung to God, who dared to argue with God, and who insisted on getting answers from God, even if he didn't like the answers when they came.’ More on that later.

Habakkuk's prophecy dates to around 600BC, 8 years after the premature death of the godly and reforming king Josiah. His successor, Jehoiakim, was worldly and selfish, extending his palace while the poor got poorer. Bribery, corruption and oppression were rife, and lawlessness increased to the extent that it wasn't safe to walk the streets of Jerusalem alone at night. In short, everything that Isaiah had warned about 100 years previously was still going on, arguably it was worse.

So, **Habakkuk's prayer begins with a complaint.** And before we look at the complaint, a quick pause to look at the key context for it... According to the historic worldview of God's people, obedience was blessed and disobedience was cursed – in other words, righteous living led to prosperity, and ungodly living to ruin. However, as the history of God's people unfolded, something else seemed to be happening: often the wicked prospered (at least in material terms) while the righteous were oppressed and exploited, often by these same wicked people at their expense. It didn't seem to match what God had promised – why were the wicked getting away with it?

This is the big question which Habakkuk addresses: if God is good and all powerful, why do the innocent suffer and the guilty go free? Why doesn't God do something about the mess the world is in? David Pawson again helpfully summarises the main message of Habakkuk: ‘The best way of dealing with such big questions is to wrestle with God and cling to him until he gives you an answer. Habakkuk gives us an example of a man who did just that. His boldness and sheer honesty come through in the prophecy, and the book is both challenging and delightful as a result.’

So the text begins with two big questions: How long, O Lord? (v2) ...and Why? (v3) This is a great example of *interrogatory* prayer. We're used to intercessory prayer, which is a posh word for asking God for help. But this is a different type of asking: we're asking God a direct question.

In this case: why are bad things happening to the good people among God's people? Why are they subject to violence (v2), wrongdoing (v3) and injustice (vv3-4)?

God's answer is both clear but unnerving: he is about to act, but not through the internal workings of God's people; rather an invading power – the Babylonians – will sweep the wicked of Israel away. God is going to do this, even though the Babylonians are not a righteous people; as v7 says, 'they are a feared and dreaded people... a law to themselves and promote their own honour.'

Interestingly, although the next part of the text is not covered in the Lent course, this prompts a further complaint from Habakkuk, which is basically: that's not fair God, because the righteous will suffer as much as the wicked, if this army comes sweeping through. To which God replies: actually no, 'the righteous will live by faith' – or better translated 'the righteous will live by their faithfulness.' In other words, he will preserve those who keep the faith, they will be spared.

Today's theme is praying for social justice, and Habakkuk essentially tells us three things: **the first is the most obvious but needs to be said: it is right to pray for it!** What is most striking about this prophecy is that Habakkuk is bold to complain at all: he can question God, he can ask why? Our God is a parent not a tyrant, we can do the same. We can ask God to intervene because he cares about it – he hasn't designed the world to be unjust. That's on *us* – but, because (as the Psalmist prays) justice and righteousness are the foundation of his throne, in other words, they're the basis of his authority, we know we can bring these things to the Lord, because they're close to his heart.

Second, be careful what you wish for. This is the harder message, but we have to face it full on: God can and will put things right, but if we ourselves don't act to reduce injustice, to put humanity's house in order, God's answer may not be the answer we want. After all, the answer to Israel's woes was staring it in the face, it always was: if society had obeyed God's law, then they wouldn't be in the position they're in. The rotten apples in the barrel were getting away with it: bribing judges, stealing, lying... an elite protecting themselves. And God had repeatedly warned Israel that if they didn't put their own house in order, then they would forfeit his special protection and another nation would do it for them. In other words, because they failed to act *internally*, God sent an *external* solution – in this case, an invading army that swept the whole corrupt elite away.

Be careful what you wish for. If we want to pray about injustice, first, let's be sure that we're not part of the problem. Do we care how our products are made, whether people are exploited? When we vote, are we voting for someone who, as far as we can tell, will promote justice and righteousness? We're close to an election, and today reminds us that manifestos matter, that character and integrity matters. If we pray for justice, and then exercise our choice to vote for someone who wants to reward the rich and punish the poor – then we've failed to be the answer to our own prayers.... we don't leave God much choice except to answer our prayer in a way that may be far more radical than we wanted. It's a firm biblical principle that you reap what you sow – that applies to nations as well as individuals. Habakkuk asks us a hard question: how much do we really want the justice we pray for?

The final thing we learn from Habakkuk – and where this amazing little book finishes – is definitely the most precious of all. Yes, he's given us hard medicine – but there's a realism and a beauty in the ending, because it reminds us that, **whatever life throws at us, whatever injustice there is this side of the grave, we have hope, because we have someone to trust.** And we can trust, regardless of our circumstances: (v17) 'though the fig tree does not bud... though the olive crop fails... though there are no sheep in the sheepfold – in other words, if everything else goes wrong – yet, YET I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.' Why – because He 'is my strength, he makes my feet like the feet of a deer.' (v19) Or, as St Paul says, his grace is sufficient, for his power is made perfect in weakness. You may feel in such a season at present – let this text be your hope and your inspiration. And if it isn't, may it lift your eyes to pray for others, and the world, with renewed faith. The Lord is still in control. Our God reigns. And he is for you. He will never let you go. Amen.