

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

WATCHING IN FAITH

3rd November 2013

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Luke 19:1-10

The prophet Habakkuk is a very modern man – apart from his name: some Biblical names have made the journey down the centuries into common parlance and some have not. I never heard of anyone called Habakkuk, it's a name we never considered for our son, and I don't suppose you did either. But all the same, Habakkuk is a very modern man; modern, understandable to us, because he is impatient. He begins his oracles with a cry of frustration "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?"

How long? How often have you heard yourself ask that question of various situations. We ask it about our families – how long will it take till the children learn to pick up their own toys? How long will it be before your grown up grandchild gets a proper job? We ask it of our community – how long before they listen to reason about the hall, or the lights or the hanging baskets or the playgroup of whatever? We ask it about the big issues of the day – how long before the recession is over and employment for our children is secure? Or how long will this terrible war in Syria go on and how can it end when the factions involved are so diverse and so entrenched?

How long?

As we did this morning, I read the prophet Habakkuk and then I read the story of Zacchaeus in Luke's gospel. And at first I thought that these two parts of Scripture have nothing to say to one another. But then I began to let myself imagine, to let myself think about being in the Zacchaeus story, not as Zacchaeus, and certainly not as Jesus, but as one of the ubiquitous crowd.

If I were in the crowd, I would have been there because I wanted to see Jesus. I probably would have wanted to see him work a miracle or two, and maybe have heard him say something thought provoking, maybe in the form of a parable. The way Luke tells the story, Jesus is passing through Jericho, he is just there because it is on his way to Jerusalem. He has no real intention of stopping. Probably as he passes through he is either silent in thought about what is to come when he gets to Jerusalem, or in quiet conversation with some of his disciples. But the crowd, as ever, forms and presses in on him, and I too would want to see him, this man that the bush telegraph has been talking about, saying such unlikely things about. Are they true? Will he do or say anything to confirm or deny the rumours?

And then he stops and looks up and begins to talk to someone hidden in the tree, and it turns out that it is Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus! Why would he talk to him, to that little cheat, that blot on the town, that bane of all our lives with his shekel here and shekel there, and we know perfectly well that he is only using the Roman government as an excuse to line our pockets. But what can we do? If we don't pay he will report us. And how often have I, have we all, cried out to God that it's not fair, as we see him

dressed in the best of fine fabrics and choosing only the most expensive exotic foods at the market – and all with our money! How long, O Lord, is this man to get away with what he does? When are you going to put a stop to him?

If I were in that crowd, I wonder if I would have recognised that in what Jesus did with Zacchaeus my prayers of frustration were being answered? Too often when we cry to God in frustration we are so hung up on the problem that we cannot imagine what the answer will look like and may even fail to see it when it comes.

Habakkuk could have been like that. We read only the first four verses of his first chapter, but the rest of the chapter has the prophet recognising that things are going to get worse, not better, as the Babylonian army advances over the land. And the last part of that chapter has him again addressing, accusing God, asking why this is to go on, why such godless people are not stopped. He is in a fine old rant, a theological rant, but a rant all the same.

But there is something Habakkuk knows or learns that we would all do well to learn. He has learned when to stop ranting, and questioning, and watch and listen. He has learned that if our ranting and impatience is to be or become prayer, then there has to be a time when, no matter how strongly we feel, we have to stop talking. And So Habakkuk takes his stand on the city wall. He is going to watch, literally watch history unfold before him; and to watch in his inner being, listening for what God might say to him.

And God is pleased with Habakkuk, and tells him that it won't be difficult to discern what he has to say. It is not some obscure thing that he will learn. It is not a long message that will take a lot of unravelling to get at its truth. It is something that could be put on a billboard, on an advertising hoarding, so that those driving past at speed would still see and understand it. And it is this, that although there are many proud people doing all sorts of wrong things in their pride, they are not to be envied, far less copied, because their spirit is not right within them. But the righteous will live by their faith or by their faithfulness.

The conversion, the turning around of Zacchaeus was not some small thing either, nothing hidden or hard to see. When Jesus had spoken with him he came into the street and declared the change that they were to see in his life, declared it in public, so that the watching, waiting, frustrated crowd would be able to hold him to his words for the rest of his days. I wonder if those watching realised that what they had seen was a miracle? I wonder if they realised that they were seeing the answer to their prayers, not in the doing away with Zacchaeus, but in his salvation, and transformation? I wonder if I would have recognised God's answer to prayer in this, or would I still be full of my own rage against the man, so that all I could know was resentment that Jesus should waste time on him?

Over and over again in Scripture and in history we see God answering prayer in ways that are not what we expect. We see Paul praying to be rid of the “thorn in his flesh” and God telling him that all he needs is his grace, that when he is weak then God's strength is seen. We see John, exiled on the isle of Patmos and in his isolation given a great vision of God's glory to encourage and feed the church. We see at various times the persecution of Christians in this place or that and as they flee from their persecutors, so we see the gospel being sown in new places, and taking root and growing. Right up till the present day when with sadness we see our brothers and sisters killed in Peshawar, and the plight of Christians in Pakistan and elsewhere finally beginning to come to the attention of the world.

We see God, if we are looking, strengthening his people to live by their faith, and in faithfulness to him. There are times when we see God taking away the intolerable situation, but more often than

not what we see is God giving the strength to find a way to live through the difficulty, through the pain, without losing faith in him, without losing faithfulness to him as our guiding light.

We are in the process, we hope, of setting up a twinning with a couple of linked congregations in the countryside near Prague. Recently we have heard from these congregations, and they list what they hope to give and to gain from a twinning with us. One of the things is that they want to be able to meet with a congregation (this is us) “that has been existing without a forty-year-lasting interruption of the freedom to profess religion.” I am looking forward to meeting with a congregation that did have this forty-year interruption, because I am sure that I will hear stories of how God helped the people to remain faithful to him in their time of trial. A few years ago I represented the Church of Scotland at a big gathering of the church in the Czech Republic, and I know that there were stories to be told and stories which were then not quite ready for telling.

There are times when most of us who care about God's church in this land and care about this Church of Scotland of which we are a part, feel like having a bit of a rant after the way of Habakkuk. There is a shortage of ministers – don't you care Lord? There is a growth of secularism and outright atheism in the land – don't you care, Lord? There are so many hurting people in our nation, and so few of us to try to help – don't you care, Lord? Your church seems to be bound hand and foot by structures and precepts – don't you care, Lord? I know that I have said such things, and recently.

If we are asking such questions, or if you are asking questions that are more personal, more based on your life and your family, but questions which end Don't you care? Or Where are you in this? - if we are asking such questions, then we owe it to God to do as Habakkuk did, and take time out to stop asking and start watching and listening. We need to watch and listen with intelligence – God gave us our minds and he expects us to use them, not to close them when we come to pray. We need to watch and listen, remembering that God sees all round a situation: he does not just see it from our perspective, fortunately.

And we should remember the story of Zacchaeus, that God brought injustice to an end, not with violence, not with death, not by the forces of the law, but by love and acceptance and conversion, and transformation. Pray for your enemies, said Jesus. And I don't think that he meant pray for their demise. God can do amazing things, things which our fallen minds too often forget to look for.

Let us take our stand, like that impatient man, Habakkuk, and watch to see what God is doing in this generation, in this land, in your family, in this community. And let us live by our unswerving faith that he is at work, he does care, he has got plans for us. Let us live by faith, putting God first in our lives and learning to look for him first of all in every situation. Amen.

--- oo ---