

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

6th November 2016

Habakkuk 3:12-19

John 1:1-9

It is hard to do as some of us have undertaken in these weeks, and to read the prophets in great gulps. I think when we signed up for this study many of us had in mind the familiar verses from the prophets, the verses which sing in our minds to music from Handel's Messiah, for instance; "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." Or "He shall lead his flock like a shepherd." Or perhaps we hear from the beginning of "Godspell" "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." But not all of what the prophets said was in this vein, and in fact all these three examples come from one of what we call chapters of Isaiah – chapter forty. It is not easy to read the prophets in large chunks. They do not have lots of stories, or historical explanations. They have lots and lots of poetry and much of it is painful to absorb.

But just because it is not easy does not mean that we should steer clear. It may not be easy, but it is illuminating. There is great good to be found in the writings of the prophets, but they do not hand you their goodness on a plate, any more than any other part of Scripture does. Paul's letters take some reading and understanding, and so do Jesus' words in the gospels. We may not want to put in the effort, we might want everything to be made clear to us all at once, so that we know who God is and what he does and what he wants of us, without question or debate. We may want our religion to be given to us with no ambiguity, nothing for us to have to work on and get our teeth into, but God does not work that way, and he never has. He wants us to grapple with him as we work out what he is saying and what that means for our faith.

Little in life that is worthwhile comes to us without a struggle, without making demands on us. Life with God is not easy, and no one, especially not Jesus, promised that it would be. When you seek to live in the light of God, the darkness of the world can seem all the darker. Just as when in the winter night you go for a walk with a torch, the darkness around you presses more closely than when you have no light to shine on your way. As we read the prophets the good verses, the happy verses, the verses of promise leap out at us simply because they are hedged around with darkness. With so much condemnation, the promises shine the brighter. And so, we have read:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6) And He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) And "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6)

and so many, many more. As you are struggling through the reams of prophecy that is hard to take in and that is not addressed directly to you, such thoughts and words shine out like beacons in the night.

It is hard to read the prophets too, because they show us a God, our God, who expects things of us. The burden of lots of those passages which are hard to read is that the people have not kept their side of the bargain. Sometimes, because of Jesus, because of the forgiveness and acceptance which Jesus bring us, we think of God as just giving and giving and we can take or leave what he does for us. But to think this way is a travesty of what Jesus taught. He too expected that those who receive from God should turn their lives around and live with and for him. Ever since the days of St. Paul, there have been those who have said, one way or another, that it doesn't matter what we do as God will forgive us anyway, it is his job. But life is not quite like that, and relationships are not like that.

To take one example, a favourite one of all the prophets but one which is still contemporary: if a husband or a wife is unfaithful, the wronged spouse may forgive them and accept them back into the marriage, to make a go of it. That is love. But if the unfaithful spouse thinks that this means that he or she can go on behaving as they have done, can continue that illicit relationship, or start others like it, then should the wronged spouse go along with them, it is no longer love, but enabling. Forgiveness is only really forgiveness when there is intent to change: it is not license to go on anyhow.

God expects things of his people, he expects not only formal worship, a turning of lives towards him. He expects a loving, compassionate attitude of heart. He expects that people will show justice, not only to those whom they like but to all, and he expects that they will live rightly before him, even if they can, in the eyes of the world, get away with doing otherwise.

But God also expects things of people who are not members of his chosen race. He expects things of people just because they are human, not only when they "belong" to him in a special way. And so, we have waded, and will continue to wade through prophecies directed against the people who lived around the nation of Israel, and especially this week, against the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Habakkuk, whom we read from this morning, has a lot to say about them, and about how in time God will end their reign of terror. But he will do it in his own time, and he will use their wrong to teach a lesson before he then teaches them a lesson as well.

Habakkuk is a favourite prophet of mine because he has to learn patience. And don't we all have to learn patience! He, like most of us, comes to God and he says "How long?" How long till we are vindicated, till we see you relieve us, till our oppressors are vanquished? But by the end of his short dialogue with God he has learned that God does not do things in our way or in our time, that there is merit in learning to be patient and wait. He has learned that even though right now things are not any better than they were when he began his conversation with God, yet there is reason to rejoice, because God himself is reason to rejoice. Habakkuk has spent time in prayer and dialogue with God, he has wrestled with God and his words, he has questioned – in fact, he has done a lot of what some of us are doing with the prophetic texts these weeks. And at the end of his recorded writing he says that it doesn't matter that life is hard, that there is no harvest or that the farm animals are taken from him, it doesn't matter that his questions are not all answered in the way he would like; his reason to rejoice is God himself. Now that is a word to those of us who are apt to moan when life is a little hard. God does not

change and God is still there to hear us and answer us and draw us close to his heart. But it means that we must learn to change how we live and how we think as we learn to live and think in his way. He does ask things of us.

A third reason that it is hard to read the prophets because they are written by human hands, and are the products of human minds. As Christians, we don't believe that God dictates the Bible, in the way that Muslims believe God dictated the Qu'ran: if we did we might have to learn to read it in its original Hebrew and Greek, and it would matter terribly that there are quite a few small contradictions within its pages. However, the Christian belief is that people wrote the Bible, and that they expressed what they thought God was saying in their own way. And so, when we read the prophets, they show us what Godly people of the 8-6th centuries B.C. thought God would say. Maybe this is why some of the verses and passages glow like jewels, because sometimes they got it so very right. And maybe this is why many of the surrounding words seem dark, because they over-emphasise one aspect of God at the expense of the love and forgiveness that Jesus came to show us.

It may well be that the people of Isaiah's day, and Nahum's day and Zephaniah and Habbakuk's day – which were overlapping days – needed to hear the frustration of God and to view the disasters that befell them as part of God's judgement on their unfaithfulness. It may be that there are times when we need to hear such a word as well. There are consequences to the way we choose to live our lives and the priorities that we make, and it is not right for re-born, renewed, forgiven people to live as though there were not.

The prophets, like all of us, were human, and it may be that as God listened to them he sometimes thought to himself "Well, that's not quite how I would have phrased it" and maybe God is saying the same thing this morning listening in on us here! But God used their words and he continues to use their words. We do not have to get everything perfectly right for God to use us and speak through us.

Meanwhile, we read their words and some of them seem dark to us; and we look around and the world in which we live, and there is a lot which seems dark to us – dark with misery and fear and suffering, or dark with uncertainty, which also means fear and foreboding. But the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never and will never put it out.

We live in the light which came into the world with Jesus. Because of that light, other things can actually seem darker, whether it is the way that the prophets spoke in God's name or the way that people behave to each other in this twenty-first century after Christ. To live in the light of Christ is to expect more – more steadfast love, more forgiveness, more justice, first from ourselves, then from God and from others. When the darkness encroaches, and seems to threaten us, let us resolve to live in the light of Christ, and, like Habakkuk of old, to rejoice in God, no matter what, as we wait for him to act in his own way and time. And if we do that then we will be those through whom the light of Christ shines in the world. Amen.