

TALK 28.4.24, HABAKKUK 3:1-10, 11-19

STORMS & STORMING – YET REJOICING

We call it 'the book of Habakkuk'. Yet this is more like just three pages torn out of the prophet's prayer journal. It's very much a snap-shot. A particular moment in history, captured on a few pages. No explanation of what has gone before & **nothing** about what will happen after this prophecy has been fulfilled. We don't get a bigger picture here. What we **do** get is a snap-shot of the dreadful political situation for Judah at this time. We **do** get a small insight into Habakkuk's feelings about all this & his response to hearing God's revelation.

The whole of God's creation is in turmoil & torment. Everything is disordered & not as reliable as previously thought. (Sound familiar?) The prophet expects the oceans to be in uproar. The seas were often seen as the original powers of chaos, in opposition to God. But the age-old mountains too are crumbling. There is plague & pestilence. All the elements of this vision are intended as a reminder to God's people of the awful times they went through when escaping slavery in Egypt. They experienced terrible plagues & pestilence. They had to go through the waters of chaos, both seas & rivers, to reach the promised land.

And indeed, Habakkuk's references to God coming from Teman & Mt Paran, are deliberate reminders to his readers of the region of Sinai, between Israel & Egypt. Habakkuk's expectation is that God will come from there to bring deliverance for his people, as before. And yet... The calamities being described seem relentless. Blow after blow is struck against the earth & its people...

In all Shakespeare plays & all Hollywood films, things get worse before they get better. We expect the same here. Only in this book, things seems to get worse, then God arrives on the scene – & things get **even worse**. One moment there seems to be a very small ray of light & hope. But this seems to get quickly snuffed out by further disasters. At the end of this book, we & the prophet are left hanging. The prophet is left without anything to eat. Yes, Habakkuk has his faith in God. Praise the LORD !. He is still somehow, miraculously rejoicing in God. Alleluia ! But he has no idea where his next meal is coming from...

Yes, Habakkuk asks big questions of God - & gets even bigger answers. But what about bigger plans for the future? The future of God's people is in doubt. Is there any future for a land, where crops have failed so drastically ?... We

have to ask a similar question today, about our food security too. After years of plenty, we cannot take our own food security for granted any more...

Just this week, I was speaking to our next-door neighbour. They have a villa in Greece, which they had just visited. Their Greek neighbours feel there is a real possibility of a disastrous failure of the olive harvest in Greece this year. We probably feel this is not really going to affect us here. Well, let me tell you about my brother-in-law, who owns a farm in Yorkshire. He sowed a crop of winter barley (I think it was). That's been completely lost. He thought about trying to sow some Spring barley, or another crop. But his land is just too water-logged. So, I think he has decided to leave his land fallow for this year.

These kind of stories begin to bring home the reality that our food supply is not as reliable as we once thought it was. It brings home, I hope, the reality of the threat of global warming. I have to confess, it is not easy to preach on global warming during one of our coldest springs for a long time... (I know some people will joke that, 'we could do with a bit more global warming'...). But sadly, the fact that we are experiencing extraordinary cold is not a sign that global warming is going into reverse. No. What it does show is that our global climate systems are getting more mixed up, due to global warming.

I have one other thing to share this morning, from our current situation, before we return to Habakkuk. Here is a revelation for the south-east of England, which has been shared by climate scientists. (PHOTO OF UK MAP). This is a projection of a possible rise in sea levels by 2050 - given the current estimated rate of melting of the Greenland ice-cap & the melting of the Antarctic ice-sheets. The parts in orange are the parts which will be under the North Sea, probably within 25 years or so. What might be called 'the bread-basket of England' will be underwater. So will Peterborough, Skegness, Spalding, Boston, Kings Lynn, Wisbech... & Ely it seems, will be an island... I'm sure that we are appalled by this and will have all sorts of reactions. Some people will feel this is 'scare-mongering'. But whatever we think, I am not sure that we can just see this as a worst-case-scenario. Our planet seems to be warming more quickly now than was imagined by scientific projections of just a few years ago.

What was Habakkuk's response to the impending disaster he foresaw? He was going to wait, to keep trusting & hoping in God's deliverance. His determined faith is a great one for us to try to copy in these days of growing crises. However, I'm sure Habakkuk's fellow believers would have also looked for a

practical response. Some way of providing some kind of harvest for their starving families perhaps. What does the Bible have to say about this?

There are two models we might look at, for how God's people have responded to disastrous famines... It wasn't by people getting obsessive & becoming 'preppers'. You know what I mean. People who collect individual stock-piles of food & other goods. That way is selfishly short-sighted & also leads to disaster. We know this from some of the panic-buying that happened during Covid.

One biblical model we could look at, would be the eg. of Joseph in Egypt. He was called by God to stock-pile grain, during the years of plenty, so that the people of Egypt would not starve during the later times of shortage. There is something to be said for this kind of national planning. However, it was a centralised system. The result of this was that the people of Egypt ended up in debt to Pharaoh. The whole nation became slaves to their leaders, who liked to style themselves as gods, with power over life & death.

The 2nd, much better model, would be the example of the early church in Acts. Bear with me here. Starting with the first church in Jerusalem, this fellowship of believers became a local co-operative society. This was at the same time they were seeing lots of people come to faith. As the book of Acts puts it they were, 'enjoying the favour of the people of their city'. No surprise. This was indeed due to miraculous signs, people being healed. It was also due to people hearing the good news of Jesus, risen from the dead. But it was also thanks to the amazing level of sharing of wealth & mutual support within that community. Not long after Acts 2 & 4, we also see this sharing model working again on an international scale. In Acts 11, the prophet Agabus warns the church in Antioch of a huge famine that is coming soon. So, they are moved to send a gift to their fellow believers in Jerusalem, to help them through this time of need. This is something similar to what we do soon during Christian Aid Week. And what we have done recently in sending money to help the people of Gaza...

How do we respond as believers, in times of emergency?... In times like those experienced by Habakkuk... ? In times like those that are most likely coming in the years ahead - for large parts of the world, & possibly the UK also...?

The early church shows us there is a miraculous strength in togetherness. In collective sharing. In a system of mutual aid & generosity, founded on the first

generosity of our gracious God. This is a vision of the church, which I believe we need to be exploring in these days of crisis. The early church is indeed a great example for us. Not just for its faith in miracles & its preaching. But in its practical care for neighbours & for all of creation. There is plenty of food for thought for us, from the experiences of early Christians, Celtic saints & indeed the example of early Anabaptist communities.

But let us return to the example of Habakkuk to finish...

What Habakkuk found was what the Apostle Paul also discovered. Paul discovered 'the secret' of being content in each & every situation. He was, by God's grace, able to be content when he had little or nothing. And able to be content when he experienced times of plenty. No doubt, during those times of plenty he was sharing this plenty with those around him & those in need. Like Habakkuk, Paul was able to rejoice in God despite everything. When Paul & Silas were severely beaten for preaching good news, & thrown in the darkest dungeon... What do we find them doing ? Singing praise to God... Alleluia !

And here is Habakkuk. Even though there are no buds on his fig tree... no grapes on the vine... no olive oil, no sheep at all, no cattle on his farm, even though there are no crops anywhere in sight in his fields - **yet** he is still rejoicing in the LORD. This is nothing short of miraculous. Habakkuk declares: 'I will be joyful in God my Saviour'. He goes on: 'The Sovereign LORD (the One who reigns over all things), this God is my strength'. My great & gracious God not only allows me to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Not only does God help me to keep going. My God helps me to 'tread on the heights'. To go further than I thought possible. To rise above each disaster. And to join others in being an overcomer in the direst of circumstances.

Let me quote St Paul as we finish. Romans 8 declares: 'We are more than overcomers, through Christ... who loved us.'... We might be surprised here that Paul doesn't write here: 'through Christ who overcame death for us'. No. What matters most in all the good news is that God's love in Christ will overcome, on behalf of all creation. No surprise here that these verses conclude an earlier passage in this chapter which, like Habakkuk's vision, sees the earth in agony, writing in suffering & pain. The earth in the pains of childbirth.

Let's pray - for a miraculous faith, like Habakkuk & Paul. Let's believe God – to give us the hope we need in these days. Let's ask God - for hearts which are

filled with love for our neighbours & all creation. Let's pray for a bigger vision of what God is calling his church to do in 2024 - and beyond. This might even include praying for God's provision to finance our Children's Youth & Families work in the years ahead. More of this later, after coffee... Thanks be to God.