

St. Mary's Sermons

Habakkuk 3:2

Our text for the year

I rather suspect that most Christians don't know much at all about the book of Habakkuk, although it might come as a surprise when I tell you that it contains several very well known verses, for example 2:14, 'for the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea'. So this morning I want to start by giving you a brief overview of the whole book.

In the Old Testament the normal role of a prophet was to act as an intermediary between God and the people: God conveying his message to his people through the prophet. Habakkuk doesn't fit this mould. In fact he turns the tables and acts as intermediary between the people and God. The prophet was very concerned about the apparent lack of action by God to address the wickedness that he saw taking place within his community. He thought that the people were getting away with murder. So the book opens with Habakkuk taking his complaint to God. In some ways the book is a bit reminiscent of Job, but unlike Job the prophet does get an answer.

God tells him to look at the nations and see what he is about to do. He tells him that he is going to rise up the Babylonians to punish God's people for their wickedness. God's answer actually gives Habakkuk another problem. As far as he was concerned the sins of the Babylonians were far worse than the sins of his own people. How could God possibly use them as his instrument of judgement? So once again the prophet boldly tackles God with his concerns.

Chapter two is God's answer to Habakkuk's legitimate question. God promises that one day he will decisively act to sort out the mess: that the perpetrators of evil will not get away scot-free after all and Habakkuk is told to wait for the day when God will accomplish this.

This is where our text for the year comes in. Habakkuk's response to all of this is to pray. The prophet is aware of all that God has accomplished in the past for his people. How he had rescued them from the hands of the cruel Pharaoh, and had eventually led them against all the odds, across the red sea and into the Promised Land. Habakkuk would also be aware of the exploits of Elijah and Elisha, of Samson and Gideon and of course of David and Solomon to name but a few. And he desperately longs to see God doing great things again, in his generation.

The book ends with Habakkuk making a promise to God: that although he couldn't see any clear evidence that God was doing anything to sort out the mess that he observed in his own society or for that matter the world, he committed himself to wait patiently for God's promise to be fulfilled; more than that, although everything around him was going wrong, he promised that he would continue to be joyful and to praise God.

It is very easy for us today to look back, with a sense of nostalgia, to what we perceive to be the good old days when churches were packed, and wish it were the same today. It is so easy to think that the grass was greener back then, to look back with rose coloured spectacles and fail to see that the church was not perfect and, even then, had its fair share of problems and, just as importantly, miss the good things that are happening today.

Take our own church for example. It would be easy for us to look back to the days of Tim Adkins when the church experienced a time of great blessing; when the church was packed for evening services.

It would be easy for the church nationally to look back to times when churches were full on a Sunday and the church played a very significant role in the life of our nation. It would be easy for us to look back to the days when Sunday schools were packed with children and wish that it was the same today. And it would be easy to forget that the reason why they came was because there was nothing else for the children to do on a Sunday in those days. Many of them didn't really want to be there and only went because their parents wanted them out of the house for a couple of hours. And, of course, the result of them being sent to Sunday school, while the parents stayed home, was that they subconsciously picked up the message that going to church was a childish thing to do. So, as soon as they got the opportunity as adults, they stopped attending. Sadly, these days, we are competing with everything else for people's attention but we at least have the advantage that those who come now really want to be here.

Or it would be possible to look back to times of revival, when God has done a significant work amongst us: for example the Welsh revival when hundreds of ordinary miners came to know Christ and turned away from the life of drunkenness.

Or perhaps we are tempted to look even further back to the very early days of the church, to Acts of the Apostles, when it was very clear that God was at work, and He did some amazing things through the apostles - and to think, if only it was like that today. And it would be easy to forget that life in the church back then was far from perfect; if it had been then we would not have had half of the New Testament. Many of Paul's letters were written to tackle the very serious problems that existed then and to answer their questions.

There has always been the temptation to look back over our shoulder and marvel at the great things that God has done in the past. It was just the same for the Jews in Habakkuk's time. Life was pretty grim for the people at that time. God seemed to have abandoned His people.

They could just have easily looked back to great times in the history of their nation, especially to the time under David and Solomon when the nation was at the height of its success and popularity. Great as the nation was in those days, of course, it still had its fair share of problems. David the greatest king of all, committed adultery with Bathsheba. He messed up big time in a key area of his personal life.

Solomon allowed his fame and fortune to go to his head which resulted in failing to live the way that God wanted. Perhaps worse still the people did not completely obey God's commands and failed to remove all the foreign gods from among them which ultimately led them to compromise. The seeds of their failure were sown in their greatest hour.

Don't get me wrong, its good sometimes to look back over our history. The temptation, whenever we look back, is to focus on 'how good it was back then' and to adopt a despondent and negative opinion about the state of the church today. In my experience that often leads on to criticism of the minister or to

the refusal of the church to move forward. Despite all our problems God has not abandoned the church in our country today.

So, I don't believe that it is right to constantly harp back to the great things that God has done in the past and wish that we could go back. Instead, I believe that we need to look forward with confidence and expectation. And that is where the text that I have chosen for this year comes in. A heart felt prayer that God will do it again, that God will pour out his blessing in our land and in our day. That we will see that mighty move of his Holy Spirit that will transform our nation. I hope that we will adopt this prayer for ourselves and pray it regularly and earnestly as we reflect on the life of the church in our nation and see how desperately we need God to do something new amongst us.

I am very encouraged by what God has been doing in St. Mary's over the past few years; it has been good to see the steady growth. New ventures started, lunch club, mother and toddlers, coffee morning, but it's hard work. I Long that God will do much more. I long for the day when we see dramatic conversions and powerful healings taking place amongst us

God is still All Mighty. I'm sure we have all heard stories of the way that God is at work in other parts of the world, in China, in Africa and Korea. Why couldn't He do the same things here? We have seen a tiny glimpse of it through the renewal movement. Do it here Lord. God doesn't often use the ones we naturally expect, instead He delights to use ordinary people just like you and me. Think of Gideon and Peter. God could very easily use little, tiny, insignificant St. Mary's. Why? My power is made perfect in weakness.

While we wait for that day let us commit ourselves, as Habakkuk did, to continue to serve God faithfully, even when He appears to remain silent to our request, and to worship him with Joy in our hearts.

