

Texts: Habakkuk 1,1-4, 2.1-4; 2 Timothy 1.1-14; Luke 17.5-10

‘For there is still a vision for the appointed time’ (Habakkuk 2.3)

‘O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? (Habakkuk 1.1-2). These words of the prophet Habakkuk could be our cry today, particularly for those living in under threat of war and violence. How do we see God’s vision or any signs of hope when people seem to be incapable of living together in peace. How do we see God’s vision or signs of hope when we have applied that same violence to our environment which now looks as if it may not be able to support us much longer?

Yet against all the odds, our Bible texts today have a very clear message. God does have a vision. What is more, we are called by God not just to live by faith in that vision but to proclaim it. I want to explore with you today why this is the case by looking at what these texts are saying to us in our current context.

Let’s begin with Habakkuk. His book of prophecy in the Old Testament is one of the shortest (just three chapters) but it is punchy and powerful. For he was prophesying at a time of extreme challenge when the security of his land and people as well as the surrounding countries were under threat. For after the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE, the Babylonian empire, led by their mighty ruler, Nebuchadnezzar swept to power. Israel and Judah had already experienced at first hand, the assault of the Assyrians who had been the previous dominant power.

It’s in this context that Habakkuk utters his cry of anguish to God, “How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” His prophecy takes the form of his urgent questioning of God. “When will God act?”. And when he is led to see that God is rising up the Babylonians, Habakkuk is driven to even deeper confusion – “How can these ruthless invaders who defy all that he knows to be just and true, be agents of God’s plan? Although he recognises that his own people are in a state of sin, how can God use a people who are more sinful to bring them liberation?

They are questions that we might well ask or already be asking as we look at the world around us today. It’s a world which in the words of the poet W. H. Auden ‘the ceremony innocence is drowned’ as those with power and powerful ambitions, invade and trample on those who are weaker. A world in which major powers meet and cynically decide the fate of those who are powerless, often with their own ends in mind.

What is striking as Habakkuk questions and challenges God on this with a growing sense of urgency, is that there is no immediate answer from God. He has to wait and to watch. He receives the insight that God *does* have a vision – God’s kingdom of justice, righteousness, mercy and peace *will* come. But they will come in God’s time and in God’s way.

Until then, Habakkuk must hold on and live by faith. But how and how do we hold on in the midst of the immense challenges we face today?

The answer is by constantly remembering the nature of the God in whom we believe. Habakkuk knew that God who had called him was faithful, was just and was committed to his people – it is within this context of faith that he cries out to God, trying to understand what is happening in the present. And it is from this position of faith that Habakkuk is finally able to stand at his watchtower, to write of God's vision and to encourage the people by his own witness and example, to live by faith in God as well.

As Christians, we know that we have seen the nature of God in Christ as Jesus told Philip, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father". We have seen God's passionate concern for us in the incarnation of Jesus in which God has become human, living alongside us and entering into the depths of our human experience. We've seen the nature of God's commitment to justice, mercy, forgiveness and righteousness in Jesus' ministry and teaching. And we have seen the absolute commitment of God to us in the passion and crucifixion of Jesus who died for us to bring us and all creation back to the possibility of God's redeeming and restoring love.

But we are also shown in our Epistle and Gospel reading today that we can have faith in God, because he is not asking us to do anything more than He has already done for us. When we feel weak, helpless and powerless in the situation of our world and our own lives today, remember that God in Jesus, became powerless for us. In the words of St Paul writing to the Philippians:

'but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross' (Philippians 2.7-8).

Which is why Jesus said to his disciples that in being faithful, holding onto and proclaiming God's vision, we are following the example of what God has already done for us. Jesus' words 'You are worthless slaves' can come across as harsh and ungrateful to us, particularly today as we grapple with issues of justice and human dignity in a world trying to liberate itself from the dark chapters of its colonial history. But I don't think Jesus was implying at all that any of us are without worth – we are all beloved and precious in God's sight. Instead, the point Jesus is making here is that what we are being asked to do is no more than what God has done and will do for us a hundredfold – our call is to respond with faith and thankfulness.

And like the prophet Habakkuk, we are also called to live prophetically. By this I mean we are called to live as those who believe that God does have a vision for us and all creation and that this vision will be realised in God's time and in God's way.

What is that vision? It is the vision to which Habakkuk along with the other Old Testament prophets including Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah pointed – of God's kingdom which is rooted on the very nature of God himself, of justice, righteousness, mercy, forgiveness and peace. It is the vision which Jesus literally incarnated, making it real and visible in his ministry, his death and resurrection.

So we are called to live by the values of God's kingdom now even in a time in which so much feels uncertain, where religious faith itself is often banned from the public square, mocked and sometimes fiercely attacked, in which standing up and witnessing to God's love and truth can be costly.

So a final question – where do we find the courage, strength and inspiration to live prophetically as those who believe and trust that God has a vision and the nature of that vision is revealed to us in Jesus Christ?

Here St Paul's words to the young disciple Timothy whom he was mentoring, can really help us. Both were in difficult situations when he gave his advice to Timothy. Paul was in prison, suffering already the reaction of a society which feared the message which he was giving them of God's vision and Timothy who, being still a youngster, was trying to find his voice and authority to witness to existing and potential Christian communities and in circumstances in which persecution was never far away.

Paul has a very clear message for Timothy which we too can take on board to help us today.:

1. Remember the nature of the God in whom you believe – a belief passed to you faithfully and lived out in the lives of your grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. God has brought about our salvation through Jesus – and through the power of the Holy Spirit in time, will bring about God's kingdom on earth.
2. In the power of the Holy Spirit through the gift of God given to us in our baptism, each one of us is empowered to live by faith in God and His vision
3. We are called to live and proclaim this faith to others – to become living witnesses to other people by our words and what we do, of the truth and vision of the God which we believe.

In all this, Paul stresses that God has equipped us for all we need to do through the Holy Spirit. That's why we're called to move from fear to courage, from hatred and distrust to love and from fear and despair to hope.

Jesus said to his disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be able to move mountains. He said this to them in the context of talking about forgiveness. His disciples were reeling from the answer Jesus gave to Peter who asked him how many times he should forgive his brother – even up to seven times? He was totally unprepared for the answer Jesus gave, "Not seven times but seventy times seven".

As we look at the world with its intractable and bitter conflicts today and also, perhaps, also think of bitterness, pain and conflicts we face in the immediate contexts of our lives, we can feel daunted and indeed overwhelmed. Where is God in this? Where is his vision? How can I play any meaningful part in showing what God's kingdom could mean to our weary and cynical world?

Yet Jesus' words to Peter about forgiveness and to his disciples about faith help us to see we can live in faith and we can live prophetically. God does have a vision for us and we can trust in that because of the nature of God as revealed to us in Jesus.

Every step we take, every gesture and move in our lives to build peace, to bring about reconciliation, to offer forgiveness are prophetic signs of God's vision – that kingdom of justice, righteousness, forgiveness, mercy and peace.

St Oscar Romero, preaching on Jesus's words about the mustard seed said this:

"Where injustice, violence, and brute force seem to hold sway, the just person can feel helpless. Nevertheless, we have the vigorous force of God, which is faith. If we who are tiny before the forces of the world have faith in God, then we are more powerful than all the armies of the world."

. May we draw strength and encouragement from his words as we seek to live prophetically to make God's kingdom visible.

Amen

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