

Living By Faith: Sermon on Habakkuk

Robert Tulip, Kippax Uniting Church, 19 January 2020

Our texts today come from the book of Habakkuk, one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament. Like Jeremiah and Zephaniah, Habakkuk wrote just before the invasion of Israel by Babylon which occurred around 597 BC. Our Bible Study group, Dan, Kees, Peter, Trevor, Roger, Eric and myself, had a great series of discussions on Habakkuk, using the Interactive Bible Study published by Matthias Media titled "Living By Faith". The big question Habakkuk raises for us is what it means to live by faith today. We had some lively conversations about this great old book, and found many points of contact and debate for issues facing our lives and our world. In reflecting on these discussions, I want to share some thoughts on what Habakkuk's analysis means about Biblical prophecy more broadly and its implications for us today.

First, I would like to comment on Bible study. The Bible has quite a mixed reputation as a book. Some people think it is stodgy, strange, difficult and out of line with modern values. Our group discussions have found that the Interactive Bible Study format brings the Bible alive, helping us to focus our discussion on real and enduring moral questions that are as fresh and relevant for us today as when they were first raised thousands of years ago. Our group don't always agree with each other on our interpretations, and we don't always agree with the line taken by the study authors, or with the Bible authors. But that is fine, because the point is to introduce us to the ideas of some of the greatest thinkers in human history, such as Habakkuk, deepening our faith in Christ and God.

The Bible is a mixed bag. One of our other Bible Studies was on the Book of Judges. It contains the rather shocking story of how the prophet Samuel supports God's 'righteous anger' when Israel failed to carry out mass murder. God had instructed Israel to inflict total genocide on the previous inhabitants of the Holy Land, but the Israelites had allowed many of them to live, making God and Samuel full of wrath, according to Judges. This is an example of a moral theory that is now obsolete, incompatible with modern values of human dignity and equality.

One way we can deal with such disturbing teachings is to say that the New Covenant brought by Christ replaced these doctrines of revenge and slaughter with an ethic of love and justice. The Gospels shifted from an ethic of law to an ethic of grace, or as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, from eye for an eye to love of enemies. Prophets like Habakkuk were gradually developing this ethic of love and justice.

Turning to Habakkuk, our study guide began by putting the book in context, with helpful information we would not get just from the text itself. Israel had a series of kings with widely different views and abilities. King Josiah had emphasised faith in God alone, but then he was followed by King Jehoiakim, who treated the word of scripture with contempt. Our guide helped us understand this historical background by beginning with readings from the books of Chronicles and Jeremiah, to help explain why Habakkuk was so upset about the mockery of scripture. Such contempt for the Bible is widespread today, and this dismissive attitude has moral risks just as it did in Habakkuk's day. King Jehoiakim is like many people

now who are only interested in their personal pleasure, ignoring the strategic problems of the future good for society.

Jehoiakim did not care about how his attitudes undermined the wellbeing of his kingdom. In response to this indifference, Habakkuk brought the message to the people of ancient Israel that God had chosen to use the Babylonians as his divine instrument to punish Judah for failing to live by faith. Habakkuk found this a perplexing and disturbing message, and it filled him with doubt and confusion. True, Israel had its moral failings, but surely these were not so bad as to require the evil Babylon to invade and take them into captivity? So Habakkuk enters into an existential dialogue with God.

Habakkuk starts off by ranting about the wicked practices in Israel, asking how God can stand to look on such wrongdoing. He complains that destruction and violence and fighting and quarrelling are everywhere, the law is weak and useless, evil people rule, and justice is perverted. To Habakkuk's surprise, God has a simple and amazing solution, to punish Israel through conquest by Babylon, teaching a harsh lesson about the consequences of evil.

Wait just a minute, says Habakkuk to God, that doesn't make sense! Sure the Jews are bad, especially King Jehoiakim, but Babylon is far worse! How can God possibly use an evil empire to chasten his own chosen people? God's answer is the timeless statement that Saint Paul later repeated in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, that salvation is by faith. God promises that the evil will perish but the righteous will live by faith. It seems the failure of Israel to live by faith has proved their undoing. Faith provides a strategic vision, an ability to learn from and respect our cultural heritage, to articulate the goals that will enable us to flourish together. A life of faith enables us to enter into the grace of God, protecting us from the corruption of the world.

Habakkuk further develops this theme of the power of faith by discussing how the order and grace of God should be at the centre of our existence. Only through reverence and awe for the divine grandeur of God can we hope to find enduring security and stability and safety in our lives. The awesome power of God is revealed in the forces of nature. For Habakkuk and the people of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC, the empire of Babylon and its cruel king Nebuchadnezzar were like unstoppable forces of nature, and the captivity of Israel required some sort of moral explanation.

An underlying political idea here is that Israel, as a small state surrounded by large powerful empires, had to rely on its wits to survive. A key theme of the Old Testament prophets was how a life of faith could enhance military security. Israel's existence could only be secured through reputation, earned through good diplomatic relations with neighbours. Such a good reputation could only be grounded in shared ethics about God, provided by adherence to their Jewish faith. The aim of prophets like Habakkuk was to get the king of Israel to convince the empires that their mutual interests were better served by cooperation and trust than by conquest. Hence the prophets argued that by cultivating a bad reputation the Jews had left themselves wide open to invasion and deportation. But by the time Habakkuk wrote it was too late to change course.

The prophet Ezekiel put this well when he described Israel as a young lion, who “learned to catch prey, and devoured men. The lion of Israel knew the palaces of its victims and laid waste their cities. The lion made the land desolate before the noise of his roaring.” But this arrogant sense of Israel’s power was empty. The nations would not tolerate Israelite aggression and pride. Ezekiel says “They set against the lion on every side, spreading a net over him and catching him in a pit. They put him in a cage with hooks, and brought him to the king of Babylon, imprisoning him so that his voice should no more be heard on the mountains of Israel.”

An implication of this teaching is that other people will often only help and protect you if they respect you. But the lament of Ezekiel is that Israel does the exact opposite of what it should do, and forfeits its moral legitimacy. Instead of building trust, Israel gets a reputation as an evil place, causing the empires to conquer and imprison instead of befriending its people. Ezekiel speaks as a Jew, out of love and care for the Jews, reflecting on the tragedy of the captivity in Babylon, praying that his people may see the error of their ways and change to a good course. He is a type of critic who is sometimes castigated as a self-hater. His capacity for scorching honesty is at the centre of Jewish identity, in a syndrome of brutal self-criticism that gets ignored to Israel’s cost, then as now.

Our modern secular world struggles to engage with the meaning of prophecy. My approach to reading Biblical prophecy tries to see how the text could have come into existence through natural causes, rather than the traditional assumption that prophecy must involve supernatural intervention by God. Conventionally, prophecy means foreknowledge of future events which cannot be known by the natural light of reason. I prefer to say the prophets of the Bible had a rare depth of wisdom and insight that enabled them to discern the will of God, seeing the implications if the society chose various different paths, entirely in harmony with natural reason and evidence.

It did not require a great supernatural revelation for the prophets to predict a sticky end for King Jehoiakim, in view of his riotous and ignorant lifestyle. To rule well, a king must take wise counsel, aiming to achieve security, justice and prosperity, the objectives of good governance. The prophet had the task of speaking truth to power, in a context where the king was surrounded by the sycophantic flattery of false prophets, and the message of God was not welcome in the palace.

State security is a central theme for the prophets of the Old Testament, in the context of the need for national unity against external threats. We often think of prophecy as requiring a supernatural insight, but the prophets did not achieve their vision in a magic flash; they understood that living by faith was about a whole life of reflecting in prayer, worship, discussion and reading. The prophets sought to hear and understand and share the will of God about how the nation could flourish, or how it could cope with its mistakes.

The prophets were not predicting the future in a simplistic or magical way; rather they are presenting choices based on analysis of evidence. If people choose one path then one set of consequences will follow, and if they choose an alternative path then they can expect different results. For ancient Israel, the prophetic insight included the centrality of

diplomatic reputation as a path to a stable and prosperous future, and the centrality of faith in God to enhancing reputation. Through faith, the nation could unite around the moral message of justice, insisting on the scriptural teachings about universal human dignity in the Ten Commandments. A shared religion enabled ancient societies to prevent unethical actions such as murder and theft, while disrespect for religion made society more anarchic. A society with weak internal systems of organisation and few friends would therefore be unable to defend itself from external invasion. That is exactly the prognosis that Habakkuk and the other prophets could see arising with the threat from Babylon.

The centrality of faith in God within the prophetic vision helped Israel to reinforce its shared identity, and also provided important moral foundations for the emergence of Christianity. Looking at these themes today, we face moral dilemmas in considering this religious model of society. The traditional patriarchal religious culture of hierarchical monotheism is unduly restrictive in a world where we need to respect the freedom and equality and dignity of people from all different traditions. The ancient prophets said we should all believe in one God, but the lesson of modern colonial history is that too often people have imagined that their own cultural tradition is uniquely blessed by God. So we need the humility to see that our personal ideas about God deserve to be challenged, and we need to respect and recognise cultural diversity.

Different standards apply in different historical situations. Preserving the racial purity of ancient Israel may have been a relevant goal for Habakkuk, but we live in a multicultural world, and in fact have done so since before the dawn of the Common Era at the time of Christ. The cultural evolution that came with the story of Jesus Christ shifted away from the old exclusive mentality. Jesus extended love of neighbour to love of enemies, and taught that all are one in Christ regardless of sex or race or class. The key teaching of the Second Coming in Matthew 25 is that in the Kingdom of God our salvation depends on including the least of the world as though they were Jesus Christ.

The political situation for ancient Israel involved a gradual social evolution from the earlier isolated tribal groups to new larger groupings, with the emergence of cities, armies, agriculture, metal and writing. Religion had to adapt to these changing circumstances. Hierarchical patriarchal monotheism was an adaptive theology in response to the extreme conflict of the ancient world. Belief in one God helped to enforce social uniformity and mobilisation for purposes of military security. We can find lessons in these teachings even as we choose which ones to accept.

Looking now at some implications of prophetic ideas today, the world is now in the situation that Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24, where he said the sign of the end of the age would be that the Gospel of the kingdom would be preached to the whole inhabited earth. The world is now joined together by global communications and all different cultures have heard of Jesus Christ, but we are as divided as ever. The most serious problem today is climate change, as we consider how our world can find a unified global response to the planetary emergency of relentless warming.

In one sense, the scientists are our prophets today. They have been telling us that our reckless attitudes to the climate would bring catastrophic results, and that is exactly what we have seen with our recent terrible Australian bushfires. Warming has produced unprecedented drought, and the drought created the conditions for unstoppable fire. The fires will worsen climate change, in what scientists call an accelerating feedback loop. We can compare this steadily worsening situation to the prophecy by Habakkuk of the invasion by Babylon. The situation was explained but it became too late for action to prevent disaster.

Personally I do not believe it is too late for effective climate action, but I see this in very different terms from the usual views. I want to conclude by sharing with you some of my thoughts on climate change, and how we can learn from the Biblical prophets. My view is that a key challenge on climate is to step back from the politics and analyse the situation from first principles. Industrial civilization has added more than 600 gigatonnes of carbon to the air. To get an idea of how big that is, one gigatonne of water takes up one cubic kilometre. It. At that scale, a sphere of water weighing as much as all the added carbon since the industrial revolution would be ten kilometres across. That would fit in the deepest parts of the ocean.

The problem with climate change is that God will spring a surprise, just as Habakkuk says God will spring a surprise by sending King Nebuchadnezzar to invade Israel. Saint Paul later used this text in Acts 13 to say that the advent of Jesus Christ is a work that people would not believe even if they were told. So too today we have been told about climate change and face the prospect of surprises as unwelcome as Nebuchadnezzar. Humans adapted to a stable CO₂ level over the past ten thousand years. A higher CO₂ level will cause sea level rise, flooding all our ports and coastal infrastructure, together with catastrophic species extinction. We don't know how long it will take, but it could be surprisingly fast.

Scientists say that past emissions already commit a further one degree of warming, regardless of any cuts to future emissions. My view is therefore that we should work out how to remove carbon from the air much faster than it was added. The way to achieve this that I think may be most realistic, even though it seems like science fiction, is to grow algae at industrial scale on the world ocean, and convert this product to useful commodities such as fuel, food, feed, fish, forests, fabric and fertilizer, what I call a 7F strategy. The vast area, nutrients and energy of the world ocean should be viewed as the new frontier that can be utilised to stabilise the planetary climate.

The world economy has added 638 gigatons of carbon to the air, and is now adding over 10 GTC per year. The annual additions are a tiny fraction of the warming problem. The world needs to develop technology that removes much more carbon than we add. On the sanitation model, the best solution is to clean up waste at the end of the pipe, rather than stopping people from making the waste in the first place. Carbon mining could become a profitable industry, growing in this century as aviation did in the twentieth. The global challenge is to reduce CO₂ to a stable level, as the big cooperative task for world peace, stability and security. Many changes caused by warming are reversible, except extinction. Keeping CO₂ at 280 ppm should be a shared goal to repair and restore the planetary

climate. We need to think at planetary scale. My view is that ocean-based algae production can become a planetary scale technology to protect ice and water and food supplies, creating a new world economy of universal abundance.

Old Testament prophets such as Habakkuk provide an inspiring message as we confront existential problems today. In particular, Habakkuk had the insight to analyse his situation objectively, and the courage to express his views to leaders in clear and simple terms. The fact that the prophets were proved right after the event led to their great writings being collected in the Bible to help teach the whole society about the wisdom of God. Their central enduring message is that faith in God provides the best basis for a stable and just society. We should learn from the prophetic way of thinking to combine faith in Jesus Christ with scientific understanding of the fate of the earth, aiming to tell a story that confronts us with the reality of our planetary situation and advances the discussion about what to do about it in order to truly live by faith.

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Kippax Uniting Church

Reading

Trevor: From Habakkuk 1 and 2

1This is the message that the LORD revealed to the prophet Habakkuk.**2**O LORD, how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from violence? **3**Why do you make me see such trouble? How can you stand to look on such wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are all around me, and there is fighting and quarrelling everywhere. **4**The law is weak and useless, and justice is never done. Evil people get the better of the righteous, and so justice is perverted. **5** Then the LORD said to his people, “Keep watching the nations around you, and you will be astonished at what you see. I am going to do something that you will not believe when you hear about it. **6** I am bringing the Babylonians to power, those fierce, restless people. They are marching out across the world to conquer other lands. **7**They spread fear and terror, and in their pride they are a law to themselves.”

Habakkuk Complains to the LORD Again. **12** LORD, from the very beginning you are God. You are my God, holy and eternal. LORD, my God and protector, you have chosen the Babylonians and made them strong so that they can punish us. **13** But how can you stand these treacherous, evil men? Your eyes are too holy to look at evil, and you cannot stand the sight of people doing wrong. So why are you silent while they destroy people who are more righteous than they are?

2The LORD gave this answer: ‘Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.’”

Eric: From Habakkuk 3

1This is a prayer of the prophet Habakkuk: **2**O LORD, I have heard of what you have done, and I am filled with awe. Now do again in our times the great deeds you used to do. Be merciful, even when you are angry. **3**Your splendour covers the heavens, and the earth is full of Your praise. **6**At Your glance the nations tremble. The eternal mountains are shattered; the everlasting hills sink down, the hills where you walked in ancient times. **16**I hear all this, and I tremble; my lips quiver with fear. My body goes limp, and my feet stumble beneath me. I will quietly wait for the time to come when God will punish those who attack us. **17**Even though the fig trees have no fruit and no grapes grow on the vines, even though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no grain, even though the sheep all die and the cattle stalls are empty, **18**I will still be joyful and glad, because the LORD God is my saviour. **19** The Sovereign LORD gives me strength.

Prayers

Introduction: We now sing a hymn inspired by another verse from Habakkuk chapter 2, “the LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”

Dedication: These gifts are freely given as an act of faith and hope, in celebration of the universal message of Jesus Christ. We receive these funds with gratitude and thanks,

dedicating them to the work of God within our church, honouring human dignity and caring for our community and our planet. Together, we seek to serve with ever-greater love.

Benediction: May our faith in the gracious God of love fill our hearts and inspire our minds to find the prophetic truth for our world today. May we live by faith in the spirit of Jesus Christ, Amen

Loving Gracious God, we come together in worship to share and deepen our faith

We pray for your presence in our lives as we seek to live by faith

Your presence can be hard to see, finding order and direction and trust amidst the chaos

We pray for your comfort and guidance, for the hope and love that is in Christ

We seek to encounter your holy word in the Bible, and use it to understand our world

May our faith give us discernment and insight and learning and inspiration.

Amen