

The Message of Habakkuk.

I don't know if any of you listened to Rowan Williams Armistice Day sermon from Westminster Abbey. I was at work at home that day, and so just before 11 I switched the TV on so that I could mark the two minute silence. I carried on watching after the silence, what turned out to be a service to mark the passing of a generation. As the last of the first world war veterans have recently died, Harry Patch and the like, that became Westminster's particular focus for the armistice day.

After various anthems and readings, the archbishop of Canterbury got up to speak and I was half listening and half thinking about Habakkuk at the same time, chewing ideas over in my mind.

Rowan Williams spoke about the terrible loss resulting from the so called Great War. Not just loss of life, horrendous as that was. (Loss of young lives. Loss of a generation. Loss affecting pretty much every family.) But also a loss of conviction of human purpose and human meaning. He puts it so much better than I can....

'An automatic belief in national righteousness, governmental wisdom, the trustworthiness of official communication and popular media alike – all these were shaken apparently beyond repair. The generation that discovered this had to find their way forward into the twentieth century with maps and landmarks damaged almost unrecognisably.'

The whole fabric of society was seemingly lost. The glorious Edwardian autumn gave way to the bleakest of winters.

Amongst all the terrible loss hung a huge question. Where was God in all this? What had happened to the problem solving God that makes everything right?

That really struck a chord with me regarding what I had just read in Habakkuk. Here was a prophet who was lamenting the evil, violence and injustice he was witnessing all around him. And wondering why was God doing nothing about it. *'How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?'* (Hab 1:2)

God, why is this happening? Why are you letting it? Why do you seem to be doing nothing about this awful situation. Why does evil prosper?

You might remember that Ian preached on Habakkuk just a few weeks ago, picking up on the 'look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed' from verse five of the first chapter. So I'm going to say very little about Habakkuk himself. There isn't much to say anyway!

In a nutshell, Habakkuk was around towards end of 7th Century BC. We know virtually nothing about him, except that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah, living in Judah.

In this short book the prophet complains to God about the way God seemed to have let his people down. It appeared that he was allowing evil to go unpunished and injustice was rife. At least, he couldn't see how God was going to restore his rule to the nation of Judah. In the end, God used a pagan power, the ruthless Babylonians, to bring about his purposes – something that was really beyond the comprehension of his people.

'Woodbine Willie' & Habakkuk

As Rowan Williams says about the angst of the First World War:

‘And some, at least, of those who tried to make sense of where God had been in all this realised that losing the safe, problem-solving God who protected nations and empires might itself be a gift, a moment of truth that brought the reality of God closer, recognised or not.’

‘Woodbine Willie’ was one of those who questioned and sought to make sense of everything in a way that wasn’t twee, but really wrestled with God. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy to give him his proper name, was an army chaplain. He got his name from offering a smoke to troops as well as a prayer. His advice to a new chaplain was ‘take a box of fags in your haversack and a great deal of love in your heart.’

Woodbine Willie shocked people with his swearing and also his theology which suggested that God can and does suffer.

He wrote poetry in the language of the trenches, giving soldiers the dignity of ‘straining and groping towards a recognition of God’s plan in the midst of suffering’

Only in him can I find a home to hide me

Who on the cross was slain to rise again

Only with him, my comrade God, beside me

Can I go forth to war with sin and pain.

He shocked people with his questioning of God. Is that something we dare to do? Question God? Contemporary society does it. In fact it goes further and questions the very existence of God.

In Habakkuk we see a pattern: of questioning, answering, questioning, answering....

Habakkuk structure

Habakkuk is wondering how God can let stuff like this happen? This evil and violence and destruction.

God answers. Habakkuk questions again. God answers. Habakkuk is moved to a beautiful confession of faith.

‘Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

But what might any of this have to say to us? What is the message of Habakkuk for us today?

Challenge to us today to ‘Get real’

I believe this book contains a challenge to us to get real with God, to get real with each other, to get real with society.

To be real in our relationships as Habakkuk was, as woodbine willie was.

Do we sometimes pussyfoot around God? I think so!

The psalms are full of lament, of crying out to God, as well as praise. In fact the Bible as a whole is bursting with people having a hard time and wondering where God is in the midst of it.

With God

There's nothing like a crisis, is there, to bring us 'face to face' with God? When the things that usually cushion us are gone or have become meaningless.

War – fabric of society crumbled, Edwardian age shattered, comfort was gone, people began to ask

Why? What? Who?

Seventh century BC Babylon about to wipe out Judah. Everything they'd held to be important was about to be destroyed

Everything we've ever held to be important shattered, lost, destroyed

Do we admit struggles with/to God

Do we even know how to struggle with God? I'm not sure we do.

With each other

I don't believe we can get real with God unless we're real with each other. I know we're reserved traditionally as a nation, but when did this 'everything's fine' thing arrive in our churches? If we are the body of Christ and part of the body is hurting, then surely we need to communicate that.

Not present in the early church.

In the book of Acts we learn that the believers shared as people had need – that means they must have been made aware of need.

Acknowledge that we come to worship this morning as frail people. Humans with needs and struggles and suffering, and if we have to put on a happy face to come here then things are wrong. There needs to be honesty between us and God, between each other.

How many of us have cross words with our families on a Sunday morning and then come in smiling??

In the last year I've heard two of the regional team leaders within the Baptist union speak about their personal struggles in a way that has been very liberating. NAMs sessions designed to stop new ministers going off the rails (you could argue that it's too late!!)

These are men who hold positions of influence, power even (you could argue). Both have deliberately shown themselves to be vulnerable people for the benefit of those starting out in ministry. Talking honestly about struggles they have faced.

One of the most powerful things that happened while I was ill was the fact that I still felt able to worship here. That although it was difficult, I still wanted to be with the body of Christ where God has put me. Has led to a deepening of relationship with some of you. There are times in my life when everything is pear-shaped and it would be a complete lie to say 'fine' when asked. But I still want to be able to say '....yet I will rejoice in the Lord, will be joyful in God my Saviour.' And sometimes that is only possible with the help and support of others.

Maybe we glimpse God's suffering when we are prepared to share in each others suffering.

With society

Have we sold a 'come to Christ and everything will be okay' gospel?

Would the church have more credibility if it was questioning the hard stuff more often?

Have we tried to allieviate suffering and injustice without railing against it?

Listen

Habakkuk didn't just mouth off and then close his ears! He wasn't adolescent in his approach. Complain and then cover ears going la la la can't hear you!

Habakkuk listened. Complain, but be prepared to listen.

Each time Habakkuk cries out, God's answer is longer.

I will still praise!

'Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

When everything is said and done, there is only God. He is worthy of praise.

Housegroup Notes. 22nd November 2009

The Message of Habakkuk

Habakkuk 1:1-11 & 3:17-19

Habakkuk prophesied around the end of the 7th Century BC. A contemporary of Jeremiah, he lived in and spoke to the people of Judah.

The book takes the form of complaint from Habakkuk at the distressing state the people find themselves in, where evil and violence prosper (1:2-4), followed by an answer from God (1:5-11). Habakkuk complains a second time (1:12-17), and God answers again (2:2-20). Finally Habakkuk is moved to prayer (3:2-16) and a beautiful confession of faith (3:17-19).

Analogies can be drawn with the suffering experienced during the Great War. Following the First World War there was a loss of belief in the very fabric of society, and alongside that the question of where God was in such suffering. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, an army chaplain better known as 'Woodbine Willie' encouraged this questioning through poetry and honest discussion.

The message of Habakkuk for us today is to be real.

Be real with God

Ask God tough questions. Cry out to Him in despair as Habakkuk did, as many of the psalmists did. Don't be afraid.

Be real with each other

We cannot be real before God if we are hiding things from each other. If we are the body of Christ then others need to know when part of the body is hurting.

Be real as we engage with society

Society has side-lined the church. Are we asking the questions the rest of society is asking? Are we afraid to cry out to God publicly?

Don't just complain – Listen!

God is worthy of praise.

For Discussion

- Having read through the book of Habakkuk, what is your response to destruction and injustice?
- Can God suffer? Why/why not?
- Is it possible to be real before God without having to share with others? Why/why not?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of making ourselves vulnerable to others?
- How can we 'be real' with society today?
- Can you think of times when you have complained to God and then listened/failed to listen?

