

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – HABAKKUK”

Habakkuk 1:1-11

As I was preparing for this sermon, I looked back, as I often do, to see if I'd preached from this little book before and to see if there were any useful things I could dredge up from previous sermons. What was interesting was that the few times I'd used *Habakkuk* were all around this time of year – the beginning of the autumn, the time when we set out on new programmes and get back into our routines after the summer break – a time of expectancy. And often the aspect of the book we looked at was the one that my attention had been drawn to this time – that our God is a God who can surprise us with amazing things. So keep that little thought in the back of your minds as we look again at this obscure little book today

There are certain themes that are starting to appear as we consider these little books at the end of the Old Testament – the so-called Minor Prophets. Firstly, there's the apparent anonymity of the prophet. We really don't know anything about Habakkuk the man, other than that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah and was preaching during the last decade of the seventh century BC. That doesn't stop us learning from what he has to say, though, and there's plenty in these three chapters to give us cause for thought.

And then there's the situation he's addressing. The ministry of this prophet was exercised at a time when the people of Judah were behaving in ways that were clearly at odds with what God wanted. Their lives were characterised by injustice and unrighteousness; there was idolatry and immorality at every level in society. Habakkuk and Jeremiah were clearly disturbed by this and wanted to call the people back to the ways of God. Habakkuk's own perspective on this was voiced in the form of a complaint to God that he did not seem to be doing anything about it. It's very much a call for God to intervene and God's reply to Habakkuk's complaint forms the basis of the prophecy. The questions the prophet asks, though, are often echoed by us today, and they are also the kinds of questions we saw Nahum asking when we looked at his prophecy.

Habakkuk knows that God can do great things. He has heard of God's mighty acts in the history of his people. He has great faith that God is able to make a difference. But he'd like to see it happen. Look at what he says in 3:2 – “*Renew them in our day.*” How often have we prayed like that? “Lord, come and bring revival, come and renew us, intervene and bring about your purposes.” We have prayed it for our church, for our city – I'm sure many of us have prayed like that for our own lives. We know that God can do great things, so why doesn't he get on and do something about the things that are troubling us? Remember the Elton John song we quoted a couple of weeks ago: “*If there's a God in heaven, what's he waiting for?*” (It's on the *Blue Moves* album if you're interested.) We would love to experience the awesome power of God in our own personal situation: we would love to see him bringing revival to our

community, to our nation. He's done it before. He's done it for other people. He's done it in other places. Why not in my situation now?

It seems as if God is not listening. He seems to be looking the other way, unwilling or unable to intervene and bring about the things that we believe are his purposes – an end to injustice, to unrighteousness, to our own anguish, our personal hurts and dilemmas. That's, in fact, how the prophet begins this little book. Look at 1:2. Have you ever prayed like that, either for yourself or your community? The word translated "*Violence*" here and in the next verse has a strong sense of immorality, of unrighteousness about it. Why won't God do something to stop all this stuff that's happening? Surely it can't be what he wants? Why won't he "*save*" us? That is what is weighing so heavily on the prophet's mind. The version we read from this morning begins with the word "*oracle*", but that could equally well be translated "*burden*" (as it is in some older versions of the Bible). It's a burden to Habakkuk: it bothers him, it's getting him down.

In 1:3,4 he outlines the reason for this heavy-heartedness. It all seems so unjust and unfair. The country is going to the dogs and wherever he looks there is violence, destruction, anarchy, injustice. Surely this isn't what God wants! And how often do we hear the same words echoed today? People are always complaining about the state of society, moaning about how criminals seem to get off so lightly with everything, there are no standards any more, society is going downhill fast – isn't it terrible? And for some of us that becomes a very personal prayer, too. We feel unfairly treated at work or by the system. We feel that we're getting the raw deal and others – those who don't share our faith and our desire to do what God wants – seem to be prospering. What's more, God doesn't seem to care. However hard we pray, it doesn't seem to make any difference. God is not listening to us. There's no sign that he going to save us. Just what is going on?

I'm sure there are some of you who have been praying for spiritual revival for years. You have been longing to see God's Holy Spirit at work in this city, in this nation, just as he has been at work in the past and seems to be bringing revival to other places. You have lamented the ways in which your fellow citizens have strayed from the paths of righteousness. But God just doesn't seem to listen. It's a burden to you. You can't work out why God doesn't answer your prayers as you think he should. What's the point of it all?

Well, God does respond to Habakkuk's complaint. That was the second part of our reading this morning. And he says that he is poised to act. He tells the prophet to look around – not at his own people, but at "*the nations*", which for the Jewish people always means the Gentiles. God is actually going to do something amazing – so amazing, in fact, that Habakkuk and his compatriots won't actually be able to

believe that it's happening. He will do something in answer to the prayers of Habakkuk and those like him, but it's not going to be quite what they expected. He is going to use the most "*ruthless and impetuous*" people on earth – the Babylonians – to bring about his purposes. It is through these fierce and fearsome warriors that God is going to answer the complaint of the prophet. They will sweep through the nation and transform the situation. No wonder the people of God will be amazed!

Now I know that it's very dangerous to take verses like these and apply them to other situations willy-nilly, but I believe that God is just as able to do something amazing in our time and I know that there are those who have a sense of anticipation that we may be on the verge of something very special. And I believe that God is ready – as always – to do great things in our personal lives, too, if only we are prepared to let him. God is able to surprise us: we'll be utterly amazed. It's one of his many specialities: he is the God of Surprises, as he has been throughout history.

There are plenty of examples in the Bible of how God transformed situations in ways that seemed almost incredible. Look at how he gave a son and heir to Abraham and Sarah. Remember what he did for Elizabeth and Zechariah – for Joseph and Mary. Do you remember the story in *Acts 12* where the believers were praying for Peter in prison and then couldn't believe that he had miraculously been released? And what about the way in which God transformed the life of the greatest persecutor of the Christian Church and turned him into the greatest evangelist the Church has ever had, as Saul the zealous torturer became Paul the single-minded church planter and theologian. Look at the lives of St Augustine, the Wesley brothers, Nicky Cruz. Talk to some of the people in this fellowship of the astounding ways in which God has been at work in their lives. The God who has worked in these ways, who has changed these lives is still in the business of surprising his people today. And it's always a surprise because, as he tells Habakkuk, if he told us in advance what he was going to do, we wouldn't believe him!

We wouldn't believe him because we've usually got our own views of what God should and shouldn't do. We like to think that God will work within the parameters that we have set down for him. If he does do something surprising, then we have an explanation for it that will prove conclusively that it wasn't actually God after all. But sometimes God has to work in ways that are so surprising, so awesome in order to prove to us that it is actually him – there can be no other explanation. Even then, though, there are people who stubbornly refuse to accept that God is at work. We haven't got time to look at it all now, but the reaction of the people to the message of Habakkuk and Jeremiah was to try and silence them because this notion of the Babylonians being used as God's agents was something they couldn't cope with.

Maybe we are unable to believe that God can be at work because we have got used to the idea that he isn't going to answer us. In fact, it can be quite convenient because, deep down, we are quite comfortable with the way things are. We can keep mouthing our prayers that God will work, wringing our hands, shedding our tears, without really expecting any answer – but we've done our duty. The situations we find ourselves in are now so much a part of our lives that it would be too much upheaval to change them. However bad they seem, changing it would be worse. I'm sure the people of Israel were more than happy to put up with their situation if the alternative was a visit from the marauding Babylonians.

There's an interesting story in *John 5:1-9*, where Jesus encounters a disabled man who has been sitting by the pool at Bethesda for thirty eight years, ostensibly waiting for a cure in the healing waters. Jesus asks the man, "*Do you want to get well?*" The man doesn't reply directly, he just makes excuses as to why he hasn't been able to get to the water. I suspect he's comfortable with the way things are – after all, he's had thirty eight years to get used to it and he's managed to survive by begging and drawing on the resources of other people. Jesus surprises him by healing him. Perhaps the God of surprises is saying to you today, "Do you really want to get well? Or have you grown comfortable with your situation and you don't want to deal with the possibility of it being any different?" Perhaps he's saying to you, "Do you really want to see revival in this community, or are you quite happy to keep complaining about how bad things are because you couldn't cope with the effect a change might have on your life?"

Habakkuk still believed that God could do something. Presumably his fellow country men and women no longer believed that God could or would intervene. Habakkuk's faith was being pretty well stretched anyway. How about you? You keep praying – for yourself, for your community. Do you actually believe that God will answer, that he will bring about a change? Maybe God will do something amazing to restore your faith in him. When you pray for God to make a difference, do you ever try and picture what that difference might be? Do you pause to consider how that prayer might be answered? If you do, then it will maybe strengthen your faith, but if the words you pray are actually totally divorced from any idea that God will answer them, then they are just empty ramblings.

It takes us back to that story I mentioned from *Acts 12*. The believers were praying for Peter in prison, but when he arrived and Rhoda, the servant girl who opened the door for him, told the others he was there, they replied, "*You're out of your mind ... It must be his angel.*" They had clearly not contemplated the possibility of their prayers being answered and tried to find another – actually far more outlandish – explanation. "Revival? Surely not: it's the devil trying to deceive us." One of the saddest verses in the Gospels is *Matthew 13:58*. Jesus has returned to his home town of Nazareth, but "*he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*" Maybe God needs to surprise you into believing in him.

The real trouble with many of God's surprises, though, is that they are uncomfortable. The arrival of the Babylonians was not going to be greeted with open arms, was it? Perhaps we are ourselves not prepared for the methods God has to use. We may desperately want God to do things, but we know that it will mean raking over some uncomfortable things from the past, or taking some decisions that could prove difficult. But so often, as we read through the Bible and come across God's promises to surprise people, we find that the surprise is to do with cleansing, repentance, deep-down transformation. Look at *Isaiah 29:14* for example:

*“Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;
the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”*

Another promise that God is going to work wonders. Just like *Habakkuk 1:5*, we could lift that out of its context and make it a verse of great encouragement and hope. But read the verses around it: God is going to break in on the lives of those whose prayers are empty mouthings, whose worship is dry-as-dust liturgy. Oh, but it was comfortable. It satisfied their desire to be seen to be doing the right things.

The God of surprises is a great and awesome God, but when he does something surprising it can be very uncomfortable indeed. I can't remember where I heard this story, but it has stuck with me and pops up in my mind whenever people talk about revival. A group of theological college students in Wales were taken to meet one of the men who could still remember the Welsh revival, so that they could ask him all about it. There was no doubting that the revival had had a profound effect on the country and that this man had really felt God's power in his own life. But in answer to one of the questions he said that although it was a wonderful experience, he didn't think he could cope with it again – it was just too uncomfortable.

We have, like Habakkuk, heard of God's fame. We stand in awe of his deeds (or so we sing in our songs). We pray, in many different ways, *“renew them in our day”*. But do we mean it? Do we expect it? Do we really want God to work? What's God saying to you this morning in all of this? I believe he is going to do something wonderful in this place. I firmly believe he wants to do wonderful things in the lives of many of us – bringing release, healing, a new sense of joy, a greater commitment, whatever. Do you believe that? Are you prepared for the upheaval that might cause, for the faith needed to step outside your comfort zone? It can be scary, but the God of surprises will never let us down.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What is your response when there is talk of revival? Do you have any direct experience of revival?
- 2) The sermon referred to a story in *John 5:1-9*. Why did Jesus bother to ask the man if he wanted to get well? How serious are we about the things Jesus can do for us?
- 3) Have you ever been surprised by God? What were the consequences of that for your life?
- 4) How do we box God in? What kind of limits do we set for him? Is that legitimate? Why/why not?
- 5) What might God be saying to us as a church through this passage?