

GOD IN OUR MIDST

(Habakkuk 3.17-19 and John 16.19-24)

A man walked into a psychiatrist's consulting room and said 'My problem is that people seem to ignore me.' The psychiatrist walked to the door and called out 'Next'.

That poor man might well have been called Habakkuk. When our first reading was announced, did I detect just the hint of a murmur '*Who on earth was Habakkuk?*' Am I right?

We are not really sure that Habakkuk was his name because it seems to have been the Syrian name for a kind of plant. He was probably a professional prophet living in the second half of the 7th century BC and a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah.

Habakkuk's job was to interpret any vision or revelation he had from God and the first words of the book are 'The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.' The first two of the three chapters of the book describe his revelation or oracle.

The last chapter appears to be a sort of response to it in verse. If you have a bible handy you might like to look at it. It is described as a prayer but it is a sort of psalm which focuses on the might and power of God.

Mike read to us the very last part in which, in effect, Habakkuk says that, whatever happens, however grim, he will take great joy in knowing God. Let me remind you of the last few lines:

I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places.

Put into the contemporary language of the Message bible it reads like this:

I'm singing joyful praise to God. I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Saviour God. Counting on God's Rule to prevail, I take heart and gain strength. I run like deer. I feel like I'm king of the mountain.

Our reading from St. John's Gospel is perhaps more readily understood because we have a setting in which to place it. Towards the end of his earthly life, Jesus is telling his disciples about his forthcoming death and resurrection. In all the gospels we find

him often trying to tell them that he is going to die but they can't accept it; they can't take it in.

In the part before the passage we heard read, Jesus is telling them to expect the Holy Spirit. Then he tells them that shortly they won't see him and then shortly after they will see him. Not surprisingly, the disciples don't have a clue what he is on about.

Then in the passage Sonia read Jesus takes it a bit further, speaking not just about his death but also his resurrection. *OK, he says, let me try to explain. You're going to be devastated even though the powers that be will be delighted.*

Then he gives that powerful example of childbirth – and it *is* powerful. I was there when our second son, Jonathan, was born and witnessed Gill's struggle and pain and her eventual relief and joy. Some of you will be able to share that experience and feeling.

Our reading ended by Jesus telling his folk that after his resurrection and ascension they would be able to pray in his name – and they will be full of joy in knowing that prayer will be heard and answered.

When we use that phrase, *in his name*, it does not mean that we need always to say something like *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. It's more a matter of being conscious that we belong to Jesus and conscious of what he has done for us through his death and resurrection.

The New Testament is the fulfilment of God's promises in the Old Testament. Here Jesus is putting a New Testament spin on what Old Testament Habakkuk has been saying some 700 years before.

Habakkuk finds great joy in God in the face of things that have gone wrong for him. Jesus is saying that his death, which will devastate his followers, will, through his resurrection and ascension, usher in God's new and wonderful world.

To quote our former bishop. Tom Wright: *It's a matter of seeing that when we find ourselves at the foot of the cross and then when we find ourselves with Mary Magdalene in the Easter garden we shouldn't miss the significance of these events. They are the visible sign that God's new world was really coming to birth.*

We are going to reaffirm that later when we sing *There's a sound on the wind like a victory song*.

But we still want to ask why:

- Why, God, did so and so have to die at the age of 35 with most of their life in front of them?
- Why, God, was so and so afflicted with Parkinson's disease?
- Why, God, was a town in Indonesia engulfed in waves and mud?
- Why, God, does a nation's secret service officers poison its ex-secret service officers?
- Why, God, is there an increasing amount of crime, including an increase in the number of murders, in our country?
- Why God, is most of Syria a scene of devastation?
- Why, God, is there so much race hatred around?

The thing is that, in his great love, God gave his creation the freedom to make its own decisions. Bishop John Pritchard, who preached here at our last Carol Service puts it like this in his book 'How to Pray': *God has limited himself in the interests of love. He has tied his hands behind his back in the very act of creating a universe in order that it should have the freedom to be itself.*

But God gave guidance about how things should work. In the old testament there is a set of rules and in Jesus there is a great example of how to love at tremendous cost.

And God's creation often gets it wrong. We often get it wrong so things go wrong.

What about our prayers? When they are answered in the way we want we say *Great – thank you God*. But when they seem not to be answered like that we get upset and say *What are you up to God?* The problem is that God, in his love, sees things differently from us.

What is it Isaiah says in chapter 55 of his book? *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.*

A very telling example of a prayer that was not answered in the way wanted is Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. *Please save me from the pain and the disgrace and the death that is before me.* God did not! But we should note that that prayer included the words: *But it's about your will - not mine.*

So where have we got to?

We have the minor prophet Habakkuk going through all the grim things that happen in this world but being joyful in the existence and character of God. We have Jesus telling his followers about dreadful times to come but wonderful times to follow them. We have talked about nasty things that happen in the world and sometimes to us. We have talked about prayers which seem to fall on deaf Godly ears.

I mentioned John Pritchard a few moments ago. The same John Pritchard, some time ago, led a pilgrimage tracing one of St. Paul's journeys through what is now part of Turkey. A few of us from All Saints' went along – me and Jeremy here were part of it. I have a lot of fond memories of that trip. One of them is that John frequently came out with: *God is good, all of the time*. And our company would reply: *All of the time, God is good*.

There is no doubt God is good. There is no doubt that God cares for us – Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension demonstrate it. Ample reason to rejoice like Habakkuk.

But sometimes it's not easy to be joyful. Life has its problems. So how do we keep rejoicing? I think the key is in praying, worshipping, bible reading, yes - but also trust and persistence when things are not going well. Here's a little poem.

Two frogs fell into a can of cream,
Or so I've heard it told;
The sides of the can were shiny and steep,
The cream was deep and cold.

'Oh, what's the use?' croaked Number 1,
'Tis fate, no help's around.
Goodbye, my friends! Goodbye, sad world!
And, weeping still, he drowned.

But Number 2, of sterner stuff,
Dog-paddled in surprise,
The while he wiped his creamy face
And dried his creamy eyes.

I'll swim awhile, at least, he said,
Or so I've heard he said.
'It really wouldn't help the world
If one more frog were dead'.

An hour or two he kicked and swam,
Not once he stopped to mutter;
But kicked and kicked and swam and kicked,
Then hopped out, via butter!

Keep going. God in his love is always there through whatever happens in our lives.

We started with Habakkuk from the Old Testament. Let's end with St. Paul in the New Testament and this exhortation to his Christian friends at Philippi.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!