

Habakkuk and Lament and Silence in the Church

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 30 October 2022

A Reflection by Jade Taylor

Pentecost 21C

Habakkuk 1: 1-4 and 2: 1-4; Luke 19: 1-10

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

*How long, God, shall I cry out and You not listen?
I shriek OUTRAGE to You, and You do not deliver!
Why do You show me horror and tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are all before me; strife and contention are all about
So the laws as taught are crippled, and judgement never comes
The wicked surround the good, so justice comes out crooked*

*I will stand at my watch post
And I will station myself upon a tower
I will look out to see what God will say to me
And what I shall answer concerning my complaint
And God replied:
Write a vision, and make it plain
So that the one reading may be drawn to it
For the vision is yet for the appointed time
And it speaks of the end and it does not lie
If it tarries, wait for it
For it will surely come, it will not delay
Behold those who shrink before the vision
And whose spirits are not right in them
But the righteous will live by faith.*

These are words based on the Book of Habakkuk in the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the readings for today. Habakkuk is thought to have been written in the 7th century BCE and has three chapters. The selected verses from chapters 1 and 2 are read together twice in Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary. In the Orthodox Church, Holy Saturday uses an ancient chant of Eucharistic devotion using words from Habakkuk about silence. For Jewish people, Habakkuk 3 is read on the second day of The Festival of Weeks, which was the day before Pentecost this year.

I'm not sure why I chose the verses from Habakkuk for the focus of my sermon today, but I did. I immersed myself in the text, doing exegesis and exploring different commentaries and interpretations. I had valuable conversations and correspondence with ministers and theologians, and listened to hymns inspired by this scripture. It was twenty years ago that I wanted to start a faith journey but was discouraged from doing so. It means a great deal to me that I was baptised at Pitt Street Uniting Church this year, that I'm a theology student, and newly elected as a member of church council here.

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What I bring to you from Habakkuk, today, is primarily about faith (with “faith” being the last word in the selected verses), and how both lament and silence can be considered part of faith in hard times and in instances where “*justice delayed is justice denied*”. In mentioning silence, I should point out there is a difference between the silence we choose and silence that has been imposed (the latter of which can, and should, be challenged).

Perhaps, like me until recently, you hadn’t thought much about Habakkuk? The earliest available commentary on this text is the Habakkuk Peshier dated to the second half of the first century BCE and written in the Herodian script. It was found in 1947 among the Dead Sea Scrolls in a Qumran cave of the Judean Desert. Recently, in 2021, fragments of a Greek translation of the Book of Twelve (including Habakkuk) were found, dated to around 50 BCE, with some differences to the later Masoretic text of the 9th century (what most Protestant translations of the Old Testament are based on). These fragments were found outside of the Qumran area but nearby in the ‘Cave of Horror’. The cave was named so because of the skeletal remains of 40 people who had been hiding from the Romans under the Emperor Hadrian - refugees of the Bar Kokhba revolt. They buried their sacred texts, and coins inscribed “*Year One of the Redemption of Israel*”, before they perished – some might see this as a poignant act of faith.

The Book of Habakkuk influenced the Apostle Paul in the development of his ideas about faith. In Romans, Paul wrote: “*For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed - a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written*” (Romans 1:17) and in Galatians: “*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith”*” (Galatians 3:11). Similarly, the author of Hebrews wrote: “*For in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay, but my righteous one will live by faith.*” (Hebrews 10:37-38).

Martin Luther was influenced by Paul’s understanding of faith based on Habakkuk, with “*the just shall live by faith alone*” being attributed to Luther and partly setting in motion the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Whether the word in the Hebrew originally meant “faith” or “faithfulness”, and if this refers to a person’s faith in God, or God’s faithfulness to us, is unknown. The name Habakkuk is thought to mean “embrace”, and Habakkuk does seem to cling to God like an act of faith.

Let me briefly summarise what happens in Habakkuk. Then I’ll describe what makes it unique and why the themes are worthwhile for us to explore today. In the text, Habakkuk is a prophet in Jerusalem during Neo-Babylonian times. Habakkuk is literate, has a connection to the religious establishment but somehow sits outside of it, and has visions. The prophet confronts God honestly and abrasively, on behalf of both themselves (like Job) but also on behalf of their community, about the difficult situation they find themselves in. Instead of Habakkuk finding solace and a fitting solution, God instead says that even greater difficulties are coming their way, in the form of an external oppressive force called the Chaldeans (the Babylonians).

What is interesting to note is that the Jewish community who wrote the Habakkuk Peshier commentary of the 1st century BCE contextualised this to their time by changing ‘Chaldeans’ to ‘Kittims’ (referring to the Romans). Habakkuk then becomes incredulous, questioning the very being of a God who would allow this, and the apparent chaos and meaninglessness of existence. Habakkuk further talks back to God, curious to if they will get a rebuke or the silent treatment, and what their own response to the exchange will be.

God has in Habakkuk a conversation partner, regardless of what could be seen as Habakkuk's temerity. As Reverend Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon has pointed out, by Habakkuk asking the hard questions, many would believe that they had no right to do such a daring thing because it would reveal a lack of faith¹.

What follows in the text is a set of woe oracles – all of which relate to abuses of power – and God indicates that the actions of the oppressive force will eventually bring about their own undoing and demise. The third chapter of Habakkuk is unique in that it was originally set to music and has musical notations such as 'Selah' to indicate silence.

In this chapter, God is depicted as a divine warrior with control over nature and can bring about pestilence and plague to fell nations. God as divine warrior is an ancient representation and also part of other religions such as a Kali in Hinduism. God as wrathful and punishing doesn't sit well with many of us. If God has negative associations for people, perhaps due to past experiences with authority figures, resulting in anthropomorphising God, it is understandable that some will struggle or need to reconsider their faith.

Dr Derek Suderman, a Canadian Mennonite and Associate Professor at the University of Waterloo, has offered: "*Scripture provides a reliable yet thoroughly human theological witness to revelation, where the scriptural context of material takes precedence over historical accuracy. Thus, even those depictions of God which attribute violence to God may continue to function as important hermeneutical irritants that provide the means for emerging with a Word of God for our time and place - even and perhaps especially when it challenges contemporary understandings or makes us very uncomfortable*"².

Hermeneutical irritants are perhaps like wrestling with scriptures for a "blessing", which can sometimes result in a life-long, metaphorical "limp" (as in Genesis 32, with Jacob wrestling the angel, beautifully depicted in a print by Gustave Doré). Irrespective of what a person finds to be a hermeneutical irritant, I believe in the importance of pushing back on harmful theologies (such as "greater good" theodicies) and respectfully challenging biblical texts.

The very last verses of Habakkuk strike me because it is certainly not a prosperity gospel:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom
nor the vines bear fruit
the olive crop disappoints
and the fields yield no food
the sheep will vanish from the fold
no cattle in the stalls
yet I shall rejoice in the Lord
I shall exalt in God my Saviour
God the Lord is my strength
Who will make my feet light like a doe's
And set my steps upon the heights*

(Habakkuk 3:17-19)

¹ McRae-McMahon, D. (2015). Asking the Hard Questions. *The South Sydney Herald*. November, 2015, 9.

² Suderman, W.D. (2011). Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's Disturbing Divine Behavior. *Direction*, 40(2), 151-162.

Interestingly, Dr Stephen Cook of Vanderbilt University draws our attention to how the text manifests female, male, and non-binary voices, with Habakkuk 3 (in particular) seen as a victory chant (sometimes used by those who have escaped capture during warfare)³. Note the authors' embodiment of the doe - a female deer - with light footsteps, scaling the heights, putting in place distance.

Reverend Dr Jeanette Mathews of Charles Sturt University points out that prophets like Habakkuk offered critique, analysis, and visions of alternative realities, and she poses the question: "*isn't this what we are aiming towards as we study theology?*"⁴ I'd like to suggest a way forward with this, and it has to do with creativity. Dr Wren Radford, a theologian and artist, states that the "*use of creative methods in practical theology take us further into what is complex, contradictory, and uncertain in our attempts to trace the sacred in our practices of liturgy and learning, protest and peace-making, and everyday life*"⁵.

Abstract art, in particular, seems to open up new realms of understanding, and can be an indirect expression of lament. It's fascinating to start with a blank canvas and to see what emerges when there's no pre-conceived notions of what you will do. I do this with abstract acrylics. Without necessarily giving details on what my paintings might be about, I show images of them to others, enjoy their reactions, and discuss biblical and theological themes if they emerge. By using art, theologian Dr Heather Walton, has been able, as she says, to "*critically affirm the sacred in the everyday, in experiences of trauma, joy, grief, and uncertainty*" and she states: "an embodied and relational self does not seek to lift itself beyond this messy, complicated, world, but rather seeks to adore the sacred within its blemished beauty"⁶.

Is the church ready for explicit new expressions of faith in the ecclesial setting? It seems to go against much church culture, and there's concerns about safety, confidentiality, and defamation. I believe this church is one space, however, that helps foster lament and silence indirectly through the liturgy, call and response, the hymns, and the contemplative groups. There's the opportunity to do this further with art and other forms of creativity. A recent example was the performance of Bach's Cantata, 'Out of Darkness', and here as part of Season of Creation.

Finally, how does Habakkuk go from lament, to a shift in perspective out of their situation, to a proclamation of faith regardless of the circumstances? And in the end, ecstatic words that to me indicate transformation? I think this is a great mystery.

Some might attribute it to being in the presence of God, or the out-workings of the Holy Spirit. The late Reverend Dr Ray Anderson of Fuller Theological Seminary asserted that Pentecost is less to do with being filled with the Spirit than being empowered through the Spirit, with empowerment being in the context of a community of ministry. According to Anderson, the evidence of this empowerment is "*not always in the obvious results but in the unswerving commitment and the inexplicable devotion to a task*"⁷. This is like God instructing Habakkuk to "write a vision" and stay with that vision no matter how long it takes to bring it to life.

³ Cook, S. (2009). Habakkuk, Gender, and War. *lectio difficilior*, 1, 1-16.

⁴ Mathews, J. (2013). Performing Habakkuk. *St Mark's Review*, 223(1), 13-16.

⁵ Radford, W. (2020). Creative Arts-Based Research Methods in Practical Theology: Constructing New Theologies of Practice. *Practical Theology*, 13(1-2), 60-74.

⁶ Walton, H. (2015). *Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for This World*. London: SCM Press

⁷ Anderson, R.S. (2001). A Trinitarian Model of Practical Theology. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (pp. 35-46). IVP Academic.