**The problem of evil**  3/5/20 dkm

Read: Habakkuk 1, Luke 21: 1-24

Text: Habakkuk 1:1-11

Psalms: 8, 74:10-13&18-23, 13, 117

I prepare this sermon on the book of Habakkuk while bunkered down at home because of the corona virus pandemic. The world is a different place to what it was just three months ago. Almost every nation and every state has closed its borders. Shops are closed, schools are closed, sporting venues are closed and churches are closed as this virus sweeps across the globe causing suffering and death to thousands.

Here in Australia we thought we had been through the worst natural disaster ever with horrific bushfires- that was just weeks before this pandemic hit. We dare not ask what the next disaster might be! But those who read history know that our world has been through similar disasters before. Those who read the Bible will know how Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation’, and how he spoke of wars and rumours of wars, of great earthquakes, famines and pestilences (John 16:33, Luke 21:9-11). He spoke of these as signs from heaven coming before the end of the world and the judgment. The final words of Jesus were, ‘but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

The book of Habakkuk was written at a time when God was about intervene in history and shake the world of his people. We will first consider the date of this book, then the prophet’s distress at moral depravity, and thirdly, divine intervention.

**1. Date**

Habakkuk the prophet is unknown outside this prophetic book, and he gives no details about his family or home town. The last chapter is like a psalm so he may have been one of the Levitical singers. His name, Habakkuk, means ‘one who embraces’ or ‘clings’. We find a man clinging to God during days of great evil, evil within the nation of God’s covenant people. We find a man crying to the Lord for answers to this evil.

Habakkuk calls his writings a ‘burden’ or ‘oracle’. Unlike other prophets who begin by saying, ‘Thus says the Lord’, Habakkuk begins by reciting his prayer, and then records God’s answer to his prayer. His prayers and the Lord’s answers come to us as divinely inspired Scripture. We do not claim divine inspiration to our prayers or their answers, but we do pray to the same God and often pray with the same concerns as this prophet. We could say, as we do with the Psalms, that these words speak to us, and for us.

Habakkuk was a man like Noah in that he lived in days of apostasy and widespread wickedness. Jesus also lived in an ‘evil and adulterous generation’ (Mat 12:39), and we live in similar days. We do not live in Palestine as Habakkuk and Jesus did, but neither did Noah. We live within the church as the continuation of ‘Israel’ and in a nation that not so long ago respected and supported the church.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah. Jeremiah began his ministry when Josiah was king of Judah. Josiah was a reformer; he worked to remove foreign gods and return the nation to exclusive worship of Yahweh. His tragic death in 609BC, and the installation of his wicked son as king, brought a sudden halt to religious reform in Judah. Jeremiah was left as a lone voice, but Zephaniah was around, and also Habakkuk so it seems. In 605BC news came of the Babylonians victory over Assyria and Egypt at Carchemish. Habakkuk probably wrote after the death of Josiah, and before the rise of Babylon as a superpower, between 609BC and 605BC. We are not told that he lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC, but in answering his prayer the Lord made it clear that he was going to cleanse Judah of wickedness using the Babylonian army.

**2. Distress at moral depravity**

Habakkuk questions God like no other prophet, although Jeremiah does venture to talk with God about his judgments (Jer 12:1). Job of course, wanted answers from the Lord regarding his intense suffering. The psalmist often cried out to the Lord in the way Habakkuk does: ‘O Lord, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear?’ (1:2 cf. Ps 13, 22). Habakkuk seems to have been crying out for some time, but not as long as Job who waited 38 chapters before the Lord answered his impatient prayers. We are to persist in prayer but not be ‘twisting God’s arm’ as it were! We must not doubt God’s covenant love, his wisdom or his justice.

Habakkuk brings before the Lord the problem of evil, evil that he saw in his society. This was the nation of God’s covenant people but their life and worship demonstrated disobedience to the commands of the covenant. The people had turned away from Yahweh to worship other gods, gods of other nations and gods of their own making. They wanted freedom from ‘burdensome’ laws, laws that demanded morality and righteousness. But God’s laws are not burdensome for those who love God (1John 5:3). The ‘freedom’ they got was bondage to evil and rampant immorality. God gave good laws to his chosen people, laws by which they would live in peace and prosperity, and bring glory to his name among the nations (Deut 4:6-8). Any nation or person that turns their back on God and his commands will not enjoy peace- prosperity for a time maybe, but not peace. Corruption and immorality, along with oppression, exploitation and injustice will soon become the norm.

Habakkuk cried to the Lord, ‘Violence!’ (1:2,3). What he saw as he walked the streets, and what we see as we read the newspaper or watch the TV news, was corruption and violence. Actually, the streets of Jerusalem were probably not safe for him to walk. Have you felt scared walking down the streets of our city? I remember being scared in New York City when turning the three locks inside the door of our hotel room. And in the capital city of Kenya I was told not to go out after dark or I would be ‘mugged’. Both these cities are in so-called Christian countries.

Habakkuk was in the holy city of Jerusalem when he cried out to the Lord to do something about the corruption and violence he saw. We know that Jehoiakim was a corrupt and violent king. He killed a prophet called Urijah, and wanted to kill Jeremiah also (Jer 26:23). The priests were also corrupt; a priest called Pashur put Jeremiah in the stocks. With a corrupt and violent king, and corrupt and violent priests, the whole society became corrupt and violent. People became rich by oppressing the poor and plundering others (1:3). It was a ‘dog eat dog’ world that Habakkuk saw, and he asked God why he was not doing something about the violence and injustice. If he lived in our day he might have found an explanation in the theory of evolution!

While crossing the road outside our house in India I saw two vehicles collide. I said to my colleague that we should call the police. ‘No, definitely not’ he replied. He knew that many policemen were corrupt, and would threaten a bashing or arrest if not given a bribe. Habakkuk spoke of the law being ‘paralysed’, of justice being perverted and of people being denied justice (1:4). The courts, like the temple, were still operating but they had become a sham. The judges were concerned not with justice but with getting rich. The rich could buy their way out of jail, while the poor were jailed for crimes they did not commit.

The righteous were also the target of violence and injustice; ‘the wicked surround the righteous’ (1:4). Again we have Jeremiah as an example. While leaving the city to claim his property, Jeremiah was arrested and accused of being a traitor. He was beaten and thrown into prison without a trial. The judicial system set up by Moses demanded two witnesses and allowed the accused to defend himself. In turning away from the moral law they turned away from civil law also.

What do you see as you look at our civil law? Sure, it’s much better than in many countries but a religious man was recently jailed for a year and then declared not guilty. Forty years ago a religious woman was jailed for three years and then declared not guilty. Do we not see ‘the wicked surrounding the righteous’ and attacking them through the media and in the courts. Are you concerned about the increasing corruption and injustice in our society? Habakkuk was, and he made it a matter of earnest prayer. I am sure his concern was not only for himself but for the poor and the oppressed, and the righteous people in the land.

**4. Divine intervention**

The Lord graciously answered Habakkuk’s prayer. It seems to be an immediate answer, but even if delayed from our perspective, we know that the Lord always answers the prayer of the righteous, of those who confess their sin and believe in God. The thing about the Lord’s answer is that it was not what Habakkuk expected. ‘We all tend to prescribe the answers to our own prayers’ writes Martyn Lloyd-Jones. When we bring our problem the Lord we often have our own ideas about how he should solve it. Too often we bring our problem after our own efforts have failed and we need a ‘minor miracle’ from the Lord. Did Habakkuk think a new king, a king like Josiah would help? He should have remembered that God’s ways are higher than ours ways (Isa 55:9).

God’s way of dealing with the problem of evil in Judah was to raise up a Babylonian army that would come and destroy Jerusalem (1:6). He acknowledges that this answer will come as a shock to Habakkuk and to the people of God, but they should know that the God of Israel controls all the nations; He brings down and raises up rulers in all nations (Dan 2:21, Ps 75:7).

Why would God’s raising up of the Babylonians be such a shock? Not only were they a heathen nation, like all nations besides Israel, but they were well known for speed and bloodthirsty destruction of everything in their path. If our dates are correct, they had recently become the most powerful military on earth. They were marching across the earth terrorising populations and devouring everything before them (1:6). Their horses were ‘swifter than leopards’, carrying cavalry ‘as fierce as wolves’ and ‘as hungry as eagles’ (1:8). The Lord’s answer details this army building earthen siege mounds, scoffing at kings and taking countless captives ‘like sand’ (1:9,10).

The Lord’s answer to Habakkuk’s prayer closes with a verse that is difficult to translate, but basically says that ultimately the Lord will hold Babylon to account for making their own power or strength their god (1:11). Power leads to arrogance and pride, which the Lord hates. He hates men and nations that fail to give glory to God but take all glory to themselves. The Lord was raising up Babylon as his instrument of punishment but would find them guilty of worshipping their success and deifying themselves.

When it comes to pride and worshipping success we do not have to look at the Babylonians. What about our own society? What about the mantra so often heard; ‘science and technology will solve all our problems’; as thousands die during a desperate search for a COVID19 vaccine this mantra is not so widely heard. Moreover, when the problem is evil itself, science and technology come up short. We must turn to the Lord for the answer. But is this what the church in the West is doing, or has the problem of evil been relegated to the state? Has the church become too comfortable and silent in the godless society in which it (we) exists? How will the Lord deal with such a church? Will we be surprised when, and how, he does deal with his church? Habakkuk reminds us that God is in control of all nations, just as he is in control of all nature. The church as the community of God’s people will prevail, but it must be the light of the world that God created it to be.