

SERMON FOR TRINITY 18 - 7 October 2007 at 9am

The name Habakkuk probably doesn't roll off even the Christian tongue very easily. If, by chance, we are into the minor prophets from the Old Testament then we would be delving into 7th or early 6th century Israel, a time of huge turmoil. Habakkuk himself was one of the cult prophets attached to the Temple, a man who would have known all the ups and downs of a ministry in which he was only occasionally taken seriously. But he had a nose for a story, or at least for a question: *in the middle of all this mess, where are the faithful ones? And where is God?*

As a result, I wonder if these aren't the questions that makes Habakkuk a prophet for our times too?

From this passage [Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2:1-4] we can hear the note of despair: *we keep on praying for some relief but God seems to be taking absolutely no notice.* Habakkuk's role, it seems to me, is not to give in to the universal sense of hopelessness. Even if God is silent at the moment, he has not gone away. There will be a time when his voice and his new direction will be made known – but that time is not yet. We have to hang on and wait for 'the appointed time', what I have often described as the *kairos* or the **NOW** moment, the time when the starting gun goes off after a time of rest and preparation. Only then will everything be in the right place for the new work to begin. We simply have to wait but we can be assured that it will come right – if only we have the patience.

That call to not give in to our desire to rush ahead is tackled in a slightly different way in today's Gospel [St Luke 17: 5-10]. After a rather painful reminder that their faith wasn't up to much, he talks about the world in which a servant works. Even though a servant might be just as tired (or even more tired!) than their master, the rules of the game mean that they still have to serve him before they can get something to eat themselves. There is no point in complaining: that is the way things work.

And the clear implication is that Christians are to work in the same way, caring for others (rich or poor, friends or stranger) without complaining about it. Underneath all this, although Jesus doesn't use the word, is something of a sense of duty. In my head I can hear the line from that old hymn, *He that shall endure to the end, shall be sav-ed...* or even *He who would valiant be, 'gainst all disaster, let him in constancy, follow the Master.*

And it was with those thoughts in mind that a letter in last week's Church Times caught my eye. I may be wrong but it suggested to me that the writer might be a retired priest. But whether he is or isn't, this is what Revd Henry Ormerod of Banbury wrote:

With reference to the article 'Inviting people back to the future Church' (28 September), and the reasons people have given for dropping out of Church life, I feel sure that very much depends on the finding, or not finding, of Christian role-models.

From many conversations that I have had, it has become clear to me that those who have found fulfilment in the service of God and a deep sense of dependence on him are generally those who have been fortunate in finding Christian role-models, to whom they have looked up, in Churches and other circles in which they have moved.

Conversely, those who have dropped out of church life have tended to be those who have not been so lucky, who have not been able in anything like the same way to see an embodiment of the power and the worthwhileness of Christianity in any individuals whom they have encountered.

Much is determined by what people pick up from the atmosphere of churches and from the evident priorities of their priests and congregations, and by how far they are thereby led to become keener to explore the Christian faith and the Christian life.

Individuals from whom something of the love of Jesus shines out can have an inspiring effect, prompting the desire to want to be like them. So-called "loss of faith", given as a reason for people ceasing to go to Church, often has at its root an inability to find people who show that "Christianity works". Much good could come from Church members prayerfully considering: "To whom and in what ways can I aspire to be a role-model?"

I remember a small plaque in the lean-to conservatory at Maria's mother's house, many years ago which began, *Jesus is the unseen guest...* The motto works, of course, at two levels. For while Jesus knows what we do each moment of each day – he is also the stranger who appeals to us to show his loving care in all that we do: the role model. So when we get anxious about the Church's future, perhaps learning to become a good role model to those we meet will keep us busy enough while we wait!