

## **TALK 21.4.24, HABAKKUK 1:12-2:1, 2:2-14, 20**

### **AWFUL WOE – OR JOYFUL AWE ?**

Habakkuk tackles some big, tricky questions. And provides some even bigger, amazing answers. At the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, and at the end of Habakkuk's 2<sup>nd</sup> complaint to God, the prophet makes this commitment. And this is a paraphrase of Habakkuk's solemn vow: 'I will stand... I will look to see what answer God will give to my complaint'... That's devotion to God. He is committing himself to standing on the ramparts of his city – indefinitely - to wait to see what will happen. 'I'm gonna wait for as long as it takes', he is saying. That's confidence in God's good promises. That's faith.

Straightaway, here's God's answer. That's quick!... In the very next two verses, we hear God's reply. But we do not see God's answer, not quite yet. The revelation is written down by Habakkuk to receive - and for him to pass on to others. God is clear that more waiting is required: '... this revelation waits its appointed time. It speaks to the end, it will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay'.

OK. Let's ponder this for a moment. God says: 'Though it linger, it will not delay'. What ?... Surely that's a contradiction isn't it?... No doubt we all know that there are places where scripture seems to contradict itself. And we can explain that partly by saying that the 'whole truth' is often paradoxical. Truth is often more complex & multi-faceted, the longer we look. And it's always important to put different scriptures alongside one another. So God's word can have its own dialogue with itself. So a fuller, more beautiful picture emerges. That's why we often have OT & NT scriptures together to preach on... But this short series on Habakkuk is an exception...

And today, we have an exceptional scripture, because we seem to have a clear contradiction - within a single verse. Linger but not delaying. Hmm. One of the ways we could explain this would be to say that our experience of time and God's sense of time is different. There is something to be said for this. It is of course true. But I think there is something more, for us to be blessed by here.

This revelation might 'speak to the end' of all things. But this revelation is also now. God's Word has been heard & received, so it will be seen & fulfilled, both now & in the future. The promises of God dwell in our hearts, until the time of

their fulfilment. God's people live today, for God's tomorrow. We cannot see it right now, but the promise has already been delivered, so it is already here.

We are the people of promise - aren't we ? Alleluia ! And yet, we are also a complaining people too. Like Habakkuk, we complain to God, about the way the world is. And we wait to hear, and to see God's answer.

Do we always like to hear God's answer to our complaints ? I'm not sure we can always say 'yes' to this question. After all, the prophecy given to Habakkuk is 'full of woe'. There are five 'woes' here, to be specific, but I spared you... & we only read three of these this morning! Those 1<sup>st</sup> three do give us a flavour of the other two. I felt I wasn't sure we can cope with much more 'woe' right now.

Thing is, we expect God to pronounce blessings don't we? Not so much multiple woes. God primarily wants to bless us & his creation together. And we do have a point about this – up to a point ! There are those scriptures which rightly re-assure that: 'God's anger lasts a moment, but his compassion lasts a lifetime – and longer'. We see the blessings of God upon all his creation, right at the start of our Bibles. And we see Jesus, right at the beginning of his ministry, pronouncing multiple blessings at the start of his 'Sermon on the Mount'. These 'beatitudes' have blessed many billions of people throughout history. Many desperate people, desperately seeking God - myself inc. Alleluia!

Now you may have sensed a 'but' here. You are not wrong. We cannot forget that Jesus, later in the same gospel of Matthew also pronounces seven woes. A very pointed warning of Jesus, to the teachers of the law & the Pharisees, who burdened people with over-strict interpretations of God's law. And there are three 'woes' pronounced over Babylon in the book of Revelation.

And we might think these 'woes' don't at all apply to us. After all, we can't be accused of international robbery, like the Babylonian hordes here. Can we ? We can't be accused of plundering many nations & heaping up wealth. Can we ? We can't be accused of building cities on bloodshed. Can we...?

We might indeed see how today, these scriptures apply to others & to other nations. We might see Vladimir Putin in the frame here. And Donald Trump. Why not include him too ? We might want to include Middle-eastern oil states, who have profited most from the climate chaos we now see unfolding. We might see the nation of Iran as the 'most malign' influence in the region right now, following its escalating attack on Israel. (Murder & attempted of innocent

civilians, on such a scale is indefensible... As with Gaza, of course). And finally, we would definitely put those who run international crime gangs in the frame here. All these are worthy of these 'woes' being pronounced over them.

(Just as a bit of an aside - good news !. Just this week, UK police forces have taken out an international network of online scammers. 37 people have just been arrested from this crime gang. A gang associated with a particular 'dark website', which stole an estimated £1m from people, and probably more. People arrested at Manchester and Luton airports. And this is on the back of two other significant breakthroughs against international fraudsters, earlier this year and in 2022. Many of them are based here in the UK. The Met has sent warnings to the emails of 800 criminals, that what they thought as 'easy money' is no longer...). The police are going to hunt them down.

And this is effectively part of God's promise to Habakkuk. The treacherous who live by & delight in cruelty & injustice will not escape justice. God promises that those who plot ruin, will come to ruin. People's & nations who try to make money dishonestly & violently, will come to nothing & will be fuel to God's fire. This is a 'woe' which God pronounces over the nation of Israel too, right now.

If we think that we in the West are exempted from God's 'woes', we may have to think again... Is it not the case that Britain has been guilty of piling up wealth from other nations...? We might wonder where it has gone to... Indeed...! (Off-shore tax havens can tell us about this, but of course they keep stum!). But wherever that money has ended up, the fact remains: through the international slave trade & through international trade, since slavery was abolished, Britain & other wealthy nations have plundered other nations of the world. And this plunder continues to this day. The Jubilee 2000 Campaign, the Trade Justice movement & the Tax Justice Network have made this revelation plain. This has been clearly revealed, for anyone who cares to look.

This Sunday, is bank-switch Sunday. Christians are being encouraged, by Operation Noah & other Christian charities, to switch away from banking with the big Western-based banks, which continue to invest in fossil-fuel projects. And continue to make money from today's climate chaos. God pronounces a 'woe' over them indeed. And us too. You might like to consider, if you bank eg. with Barclays, HSBC, Nat West, Santander, switching to a bank which is not investing in fossil-fuel projects. More details in Carey's newsletter for today.

There are many current political applications for Habakkuk's prophecy over the nations. But equally, there are many spiritual applications. For us. For today.

Habakkuk poses troubling questions. About how injustice & bloodshed seems to reign - in a world where God is supposed to reign over the nations. God's answer is for us to wait, to pray. God's answer is here & it is coming.

But God's answer is also for us to act: to trust **& obey**... We are called to 'do mercy, to live justly', in the words of another prophet. As the saying goes, 'all that it takes for evil to triumph, is for good people to do nothing'. So, we need to do more than simply to pray, important though this is. Our lives need to be aligned with God's will. With what is good for us & all creation. We need to take specific actions to reduce our carbon footprint - not maintaining or increasing our carbon footprint. For the sake of all God's creation. (That might mean - eg. flying less, changing our eating habits, or our energy provider)...

Big questions demand big answers (as well as our small part in these big answers). Habakkuk's small part was to take a particular stand & watch & wait. He posed a troubling question – about how is it possible for God to use big disasters to bring about even bigger, positive outcomes...?

Well, God did have a big answer. A simple answer. God's answer to all our complaints & all our prayers is the same. God says: 'I am the Great I AM, and I give myself to you'...

God's perfect answer to all the sin & suffering of the world is the gift of Jesus, our righteous & suffering Saviour. Alleluia ! God has determined, and is determined, that He will redeem all creation, by the blood of Jesus. 'The Lamb of God, who was slain before the creation of the world'. Alleluia ! And as if that isn't enough, God has shown his commitment to us by another gift. The gift of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were told, after they saw Jesus raised from the dead, to wait for this gift. This gift might linger, but he won't delay...

As we receive bread & wine in a moment, we know that we are not just remembering Jesus' death & resurrection in the past, but by the Holy Spirit, we are celebrating his life among us **today**. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift – the gift of God's Son & God's Spirit. Alleluia! And as we celebrate God's promised presence with us now, we celebrate God's promise for the future: 'Injustice **will** exhaust itself' and '... the earth **will** be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God...'. Alleluia !

Let us commit ourselves to waiting on God, between now & Pentecost. God's Spirit is here, God's Spirit will come. Let's commit ourselves to trusting & obeying, in prayer & action in the coming days. As we prepare to receive bread & wine in a moment, we are going to sing. A song of faith & commitment. A song declaring, with Habakkuk, our personal determination to watch & wait and walk with God. (Andre is going to lead in a sing: 'I give you my heart').