

Questions for God

Sunday 2 October, 2016

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, Revd Dr Ruth Redpath.

Readings: Habakkuk 1 : 1-4; 2 : 1-4, and 2 Timothy 1 : 1-14

Paul's letter to Timothy from which we read is his last. It is written from prison. His death could come at any time, so he is passing the baton to the next generation of Christians of whom Timothy the young leader is one. But Paul has discerned in him some diffidence in his role. Perhaps - as Paul's protégée - Timothy felt under the shadow of the great apostle, perhaps also - as we know from an earlier letter - he was aware of carrying less authority because of his relative youth.

But - it **could be** that Timothy was less confident in the good news of the gospel because others in the church at that time had rejected Paul and even turned back from following Jesus Christ.

Why might that have occurred?

We have to remember that, despite the establishment of many Christian faith communities throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Christians remained a very small minority.

We know from the gospels that the culture of the people among whom Jesus moved - in what we now call Israel and Palestine - was strongly centred on family ties and based on notions of honour and shame. If people behaved outside the cultural norms of their community, this brought shame not just on them, but on their family, even their village.

Similarly in the Roman world where many of the Christians lived.

Within the empire's power structures, being an associate of the powerful gave one status, and one could expect preferential treatment. On the other hand, all kinds of things could bring shame on a person or a family.

Paul knew this only too well. He was in prison, which, just as today, had a stigma attached.

Even more so, though, because the reason for his imprisonment was his proclamation of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, as the king - in direct conflict with the prevailing cult of Caesar worship. Christians refused to bow down to any human ruler in worship. So - automatically - Paul was out of favour with those in power, and, by association, all Christians were too, bringing shame on them.

For some, this resulted in a distancing of themselves from Paul.

This, he believed, meant that they were ashamed not just of him – in prison – a failure one might say - but ashamed of being Christians and even of the gospel itself.

So, lest Timothy give in to such pressure, Paul tackles the issue. "Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord," he says, "nor of me his prisoner".

On what basis does he say this?

Well he says, the call of God is placed on all Christians, not on the basis of merit or status, but on the grace of God shown to us all equally in the coming of our Saviour. "God has saved us and called us with a holy calling".

And for himself personally he says "I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher". That is why I suffer and why I am in prison.

But, he continues to Timothy, **I am not ashamed**. I have a higher loyalty. I have put my trust in an eternal God whose purposes are not always clear at any particular moment. This might involve suffering just as I am experiencing right now. But my commitment is not to Caesar but to Jesus Christ and his gospel. Whatever the outcome, faithfulness to that calling overrides any concern about what others might think. My reputation is in safe hands.

So, Timothy, I would ask that you not be ashamed either - not of me, nor of the gospel. But join with me in setting aside the cultural pressure. We can do this, through the help of the Holy Spirit living in us – a spirit not of cowardice, but of power and love and self-discipline.

Contemporary Australian society does not operate in quite the same way as the Roman world of Paul's day. However, we know that, in many countries today shame-based cultures continue, and there it can be very complicated for a person who chooses to follow Christ. But Christians in any culture can be vulnerable to all kinds of pressure to conform to something less than our calling as members of Christ's family. And we here are not immune.

I am sure you can think of some.

- the cynicism of our materialistic society,
- the attraction of less demanding commitments,
- accusations of faith being anti-intellectual or emotionally infantile,
- and perhaps the commonest in our society - the suspicion of anyone who has a firm commitment to a belief system as being fanatical

Of course, **we should be ashamed** of human failures occurring in ourselves and the church – distorted presentations of the faith and, especially in our time, the scandal of child abuse.

But are we ashamed of the gospel? Of the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ who - as the climax of God's purposes through the ages - became one of us, and in his death and resurrection took away the sting of sin and death, giving us forgiveness and eternal life?

No, we should not and need not be. The gospel is the power of God to salvation for all.

I have often heard it said - even among regular church-goers - that they don't know why we have so many readings, especially questioning why we read from the Hebrew Scriptures - the Old Testament. One could answer that in several ways.

One important reason I would suggest is that it helps us to see the whole panorama of God's dealings with us from the beginning of time, the coming of Jesus about which we have just been speaking, right through to the time when all things will be brought to a conclusion.

Perhaps strangely, we can find in those pages something strikingly contemporary, and I believe that to be true of Habakkuk, that short, little-known book, hidden away among the Minor Prophets, from which we read this morning..

Habakkuk was called to speak God's word to his people at a time of profound moral and spiritual decline. Violence and destruction and strife were commonplace, exploitation of their own people was endemic, and justice was not being delivered. **Evil seemed to be triumphing over good.**

The people of Judah were not willing to admit the disintegration of their society and the imminent threat of their powerful neighbours - the Babylonians.

As Habakkuk contemplates this situation, we find him in those first few verses praying, questioning God.

"How long?" He asks. "Why?" he calls out to God.

How long is this going to go on for?

Why don't you do something about it?

God's response to this (which we have not read) only serves to bother Habakkuk further.

God tells him that he will not prevent the powerful Babylonian army invading. Unless God's people turn back to him, that army - violent, and ruthless as they are known to be - will be the vehicle of God's judgment on them.

Bewildered, Habakkuk replies with yet another question.

How could you possibly let this happen? You are the eternal God, the all-powerful one. And yet you will let this army destroy your people?

And the Babylonians are such a godless, evil people. How can you let such as these inflict this damage, when you a holy God who cannot bear to look on evil?

Have you ever found yourself asking such questions?

As you watch the TV news, or consider your personal situation, have you ever asked, How long Lord?

In the world we confront a bewildering array of uncertainties and evils

- apparently limitless violence and extremism
- widespread conflicts which seem insoluble

- We feel powerless and frightened by the inertia in the face of climate change
- We are ashamed of the abuse inflicted on refugees in detention
- And the list goes on.

And in our individual lives - we encounter

- personal tragedy,
- life-threatening illness;
- injustice in the workplace

And we ask “Lord how long? Why? When are you going to act?”

Like Habakkuk, we feel that **our experience doesn't quite match our belief in God.**

Let me reassure you, there is nothing new about such feelings. We are in good company. Not just Habakkuk, but Moses and Jeremiah and Job posed precisely those questions. The Psalms are full of the anguished cries of those who wonder what God is doing. The questions are valid.

If we don't wrestle with a possible answer, however incomplete that may be, we are liable to despair and paralysis. So where do we look?

In the second paragraph of our reading, we read of Habakkuk's next move. He went for a walk and stood quietly at a lookout point at some distance from all that was distressing him. He waited, listening to hear what God might say.

Taking in the view, he was able to imagine a bigger picture, to gain a new, a fresh, perspective.

God's purposes for his people were much grander than he could envisage. They were part of a bigger story, operating in an eternal timeframe.

As he waited and listened, he was given a renewed confidence in the God who had called him and given him the vision of a coming reign of justice and peace, even though his understanding was incomplete. God was in control - **at his appointed time** all would be made clear.

He heard God say “The righteous shall live by their faith”. Never mind those arrogant Babylonians and their dreaded army. “Those who place their trust in me, those who are faithful to me, shall live”. That is the nature of my commitment to you. I will be faithful to you if you are faithful to me.

So it is that at the end of his dialogue with God, Habakkuk could say, “The earth **will be** filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

God is the one stable element in an unstable world. He is our rock, our refuge.

The Babylonians then, or Al Qaida or any other group now, might think they are in control, but they are not.

God is at work now as he was then.

The questions about good and evil remain unanswered. None of us is beyond the reach of suffering. And we don't know how long the violence and chaos and pain in this world will continue.

However, God's pledge of the final putting right was given us in the coming of Jesus Christ, the one who experienced all the suffering and pain and ambiguity of human life and in whose death and resurrection the power of God over all other powers was demonstrated. Such knowledge gives us an advantage over Habakkuk.

But, until that day, we are called to carry the vision of a new order of justice and peace - unashamedly, but humbly, declaring the gospel of the love and mercy of God for all.