**Annual Meeting 2020 Habakkuk 3: 16-19**

Some years ago the previous Bishop of Bedford Richard Inwood, who never lost his first desire to make Jesus known through teaching the Bible, joined us at St Marys to give a series of addresses about prayer during Lent. And the third was based on this passage in Habakkuk 3.

I found it moving and challenging then. And it has such a resonance for us this year. The prophet Habakkuk if you read cc1&2 has been shaken to the core by the devastation visited on Judah and Jerusalem by the enemies of the Lord’s people. The nation has been laid low. And turned upside down. The future seems radically uncertain and bleak in the extreme. And behind the cruelty of the Babylonians has been the hand of God, allowing, not restraining, even sending calamity. Not the same as our situation; but similar

In between time. VUCA. Volatile. Uncertain. Complex. Ambiguous. So demanding and stressful. We are carrying heartaches sorrows concerns about the vulnerable, concerns about the young, plans and holidays that have been torn up. We’ve been unable to grieve with one another and bring comfort to bereaved families as we longed to do - Mervyn Pestell, Kirsty Edwards, Dorothy Orchart - all treasures of St Marys. Wrigglers Lunch Club Church socials. Patience tested. Motivation is a challenge. Opinion will polarise. Last year adopted vision to prayerfully double our numbers by 2024 - begun to put together a five year plan. That is now torn up - we will need to start afresh.

cc1&2 Habakkuk wrestling with it - to and fro with God. C3 - prayer. Prayer which ends with two resolutions. As Habakkuk realises that though he may lose everything, he loses nothing.

Imagines what may well have come to pass. Loss of every material blessing and even of the means of sustaining life and family - v17. Resolves first. **to wait** for God’s time - v 16. He knows the LORD will bring justice, will do right. The LORD has not had a change of personality since he passed before Moses and for the first time Moses heard the LORD describing the heart of his own character: *The Lord the LORD the compassionate and gracious LORD slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*. So Habakkuk resolves to wait, as we wait for the LORD who as we see so much more clearly in the face of Jesus is the God of boundless compassion and infinite loving kindness.

Resolves second **to rejoice**. V18. Time for lament - there was a time - time for lament is over. Resolves to rejoice what he can never lose, will never be taken away, was always more precious and trustworthy, and guarantees his security infinitely more than the most numerous of herds and the richest of harvests. The knowledge of God my Saviour. Resolves to live by faith and rejoice in the LORD. To love God for who he is which will never change rather than for the good things he gives.

Bob Kauflin is world famous Christian sing writer Sovereign Grace Music - Sing! Glory conference early September - interview - he was asked by Keith Getty ‘how can we use this time?’ His answer: *There is no more important thing you can do than to get to know your Saviour better*

That is for us today. As Habakkuk’s prayer is for us. In March, we thought this would be a three month crisis. Now we know different. It’s going to be months if not years. Church as we knew it has gone. Certainly for a long time. Perhaps forever. I don’t see us resuming everything as it used to be when coronavirus ends. The services we will livestream will be different - different from YouTube, different from before. Life we knew has gone . . . for a long time. Our challenge is Habakkuk’s challenge. What will be the dominant note of your life? Lament, anger, frustration, despair, bitterness? Or will we live by faith, rejoicing in the LORD, being joyful in God my Saviour?

**Dangerous and pregnant time - for Christians.** **Dangerous** - church is hard work, growth groups are hard work, meetings are hard work. In such times - motivation falls, life complex, don’t see each other - church and growth group and keeping in touch take second place, or third place, or no place. Easily becomes weeks since I sat through service with my husband. Picked up the Church at Home with my children. Dangerous time - NT full of warnings about drifting away.

**Pregnant time** - full of possibility. Evangelical Christians are activists - good reason for that - world to be reached for Christ - downside is - like Martha in Luke 10 - we are distracted by activity, obsessed with all the preparations that had to be made. To the exclusion of the person it is all about, all for. Jesus to Martha - but only one thing is needed. Mary sitting at his feet getting to know her Saviour better.

Bob Kauflin’s advice is straight from Luke 10 & Habakkuk 3: *There is no more important thing we can do than to get to know your Saviour better*. To do that as Christians have always done it - with one another. Learning Christ, learning grace, learning how to live in faith love and hope.

Upsides in this crisis - as we rediscover the psalms, together and one to one. As we find resources to sustain us in isolation - Sing! Global, Explore, Scotty Smith, CofE Daily Prayer. As we listen on Spotify to Christian music - as I’ve been doing on my morning dog walks. As we chat in Zoom breakouts to people we rarely spoke to in church; as we join with one another in prayer at the fortnightly prayer gathering; as we hear on the YouTube channel the voices of more and more church members who have discovered how to record and upload. As we did what we could to bless our community with impromptu Harvest Scarecrow Trail. As musicians have worked creatively together as never before to record and mix tracks of songs. As the limitations of online holiday club and growth groups have meant choices have had to be made so to prioritise the voice of God in the Scriptures and responding to him in prayer

How did Christians manage without it? Dilemmas of the online environment. But it tilts the balance towards the individual - I can do everything on catch-up. I can disappear down a rabbit hole of my own preferences or hobby horses. Dangerous - made to learn Christ with one another, no on our own.

How shall we live, how shall we live together as a church?

Perilous to risk any prediction. But **when we look back in two years time what would we want to say?**  Let me suggest by way of vision.

**Will we be giving thanks for a church family:**

* That has grown to know her Saviour better?
* That has grown closer to one another, patiently and more and more skilful bearing one another’s burdens and speaking gospel truth in love into each other’s needs in our growth groups - on the phone - standing at a distance in the churchyard in December?
* For families have learnt to read and apply the Bible, sing and pray together at home - children will say I learned what my parents cared most about was that we all loved Jesus?
* That we found new ways to serve people in need around us?
* Whose support and love for mission partners and ministries growing not suffering?
* That has continued faithfully to uphold orthodox biblical faith and practice in the Church of England, including in the coming debates about human sexuality?
* Which was joyfully sending links to online services and Christianity Explored and growth groups to friends and family here and around the world?
* That we learned to make bold decisions to change the way we do church, to invest where we need to in equipment and training and resources so that as many people as possible can hear the word of God as often as possible and meet with one another as easily as possible?
* Where every household was giving to the work of St Marys generously and sacrificially, and learning the joy of coming together to pray regularly and joyfully?
* Has learnt to lament honestly without losing hope?

And all because the disaster of coronavirus had brought home to us that there is no more important think we can do, than to get to know our Saviour better.

And as we did so we discovered like Habakkuk that *The Sovereign LORD is my strength, he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights*.

Amen

Peter Ackroyd

September 2020