

16th Sunday after Trinity, October 5th, 2025

8.00, 10.30 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Habakkuk 1.1-4, 2.1-4 30.15-e, 2 Timothy 1.1-14, Luke 17.5-10

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I was rather hoping that today's lectionary readings would enable me to take up Mark's theme of church finance and deliver a rant about wealth and personal riches that would leave you all squirming in your seats – perhaps the verse from the prophet Haggai

Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

But unfortunately the lectionary has let me down in this regard and nothing of this sort appears in today's readings, so I will have to forego the rant, which is a shame, but can't be helped. But to the readings that are set for today. The unifying theme can be summed up in one word – faith – although it seems to me that the three readings are actually referring to rather different things when they use that word. The rather odd gospel reading see the apostles asking for more faith. The context of this is the "apostles" as they are called, having returned from a missionary journey where they seem to have witnessed and performed miracles, so perhaps they are asking for faith so that they may continue to perform in this way. Or perhaps they are asking for faith to fulfil the teaching of Jesus given just before this reading – to forgive those who sin against the "seventy times seven". But whatever their motivation Jesus gives this rather enigmatic reply

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.

Perhaps he is referring here to the quality of faith, rather than the quantity; perhaps he is looking forward to how redeemed humanity will be able to fulfil their God given role as masters of creation – or perhaps, and I am inclined to think this, he is in reality looking forward to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and saying something like "you ain't seen nothing yet". But it is an odd reading with an ill defined context and a very enigmatic response.

In the epistle we read of Timothy's faith – something much simpler that has been handed down the generations from his grandmother and mother – a faith that simply believes and trusts, a quiet low-level faith. Paul in the reading urges Timothy to fan the embers of this faith, to use the gifts he has been given to witness to the truth of the gospel, in perhaps difficult circumstances.

But it is the Old Testament reading from the prophet Habakkuk I find most interesting.

The righteous live by their faith.

To the best of my knowledge, I have never preached on Habakkuk, so, even if this sermon is necessarily quite short, it is some thing of a milestone for me. I suspect the same might be true for all of you – have you ever heard a sermon on Habakkuk before? Habakkuk is very interesting, and not only for the fact that it is the only word that I know of that is even occasionally used in the English language that has a double k - I am sure I will be told of others later. But the book is not a prophecy as such – it is more of a conversation with God. It begins by the prophet complaining to God about the Jewish society he lives in

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Then in verses that are missed out in our reading, Habakkuk perceives the voice of God saying that he is going to do something - the Chaldeans were on the march from the north and would destroy the evil and the violence that Habakkuk was experiencing. But Habakkuk then goes to reply, that this wasn't exactly the solution he wanted – the Chaldeans, a ruthless warrior nation were as bad if not worse, than the Judea in which he lived.

Habakkuk then continues – that he will continue to watch, to see how God will respond to his second complaint. And again he perceives the response of God

Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

There is more to come after the Chaldeans and that they too will be met with justice in God's time. The future may be uncertain and uncomfortable but God will judge, and again the following verses spell out the sins and iniquities of both the people of Judah and the Chaldeans and the nature of the coming judgement, in quite apocalyptic terms, that seems to have both an immediate short term aspect but also looks forward to "the Day of the Lord" when

...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea...

And in the turmoil that is to come, the righteous will live by their faith – trust and hope in a God who has down the generations from Abraham, through to Moses and the Exodus, through to the kingdoms of David and Solomon has saved and protected his people. Faith here is a trust and a hope that God is still in control and will not forget them.

And so for us. We live in an uncertain world, and we could equally make the first complaint of Habakkuk about the society in which we live. And we can perhaps already see the beginning of events that may lead to major changes and perhaps the tearing down of some of the pillars of that society. And internationally the drums of war can again be heard uncomfortably close by. But the message of the reading is still that the righteous will live

by their faith. And we have something greater to hang on to than the story of God's people in ancient times – Jesus, who, in the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, God incarnate in this world, who has defeated evil and death and cares for and protects his people, each one of us, whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in. It is faith in this Jesus that upholds us and enables us to continue to live our lives in uncertain times.

But there is a message too here for Christian leaders, including the new Archbishop, that the role of watchman is still an important one – to speak out on the ills of our nation, both personal and corporate, to seek God's vision for the future of the church and the nation, and to proclaim that vision, no matter how difficult it might be for both the speaker and the hearers. Whether the press like that or not, it seems to me that, whilst we have an established church, that is part of the job. The new Archbishop will need our prayers in the months and years to come.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen