Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
21st Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Habakkuk 1:1–4, 2:1–4; Psalm 119:137–144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12; Luke 19:1–10
ACNA Readings – Isaiah 1:10–20; Psalm 32; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12; Luke 19:1–10

Introduction. In our world, we are faced with some awful examples of arrogant leaders and of wickedness in the hearts of humanity generally. We may find our hearts agonising over the state of our world or of our nation, and we cry out: Where is God in all this? And what about the Church, even my church? Have we agonised over failures amongst God's people, even when they seem to be going through the motions: practising the rites but not doing what is right! And then, if I'm honest, what about my own heart at times?

Common Theme. The Bible teaches us that God is just and his laws are just. His people deeply believe this to be true, but, if this is true, why is it that all around we can see examples of wicked people seemingly getting away with it, or even of good people suffering? In contrast, how beautiful it is to see wicked lives saved by God's grace and transformed into Christ-likeness. True salvation!

Habakkuk 1:1–4, 2:1–4. Why, God? The title for this book tells us simply that Habakkuk was a prophet. "His name is apparently Hebrew but reflects the influence of the Mesopotamians, who ruled over Israel from the ninth to the sixth century BC. In their Akkadian language, his name means a plant or fruit tree" (New Bible Commentary, 839). He may have been one of the Levites, given their role in the temple liturgy and given the psalm in chapter 3, with its musical notation.

This prophet is courageous enough to question God, like Job did, as he cannot match his theology with his current reality. But Job and Habakkuk are different. Job asks why he is punished when he is innocent, but Habakkuk asks why the wicked amongst God's people are *not* punished when they are clearly *not* innocent.

The first two chapters are Habakkuk's dialogue with Yahweh, with questions broached by Habakkuk and responses given by Yahweh. Our reading includes the first question concerned with God's slowness in punishing the wicked among his chosen people (1:2-4). God's answer does not allay Habakkuk's perplexity, however, since the cure seems to be too extreme for the disease! God explains that this interim punishment is not the end. His people deserve punishment, and it will come through Babylon, but Babylon is not without blame, since its barbarity will also come under God's judgment (2:2–20).

A sharp contrast is drawn between the arrogant, misguided Babylonians and those within Israel who act justly (2:4). This last verse in our reading is familiar due to its frequent quotation in the NT (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). "Grappling with the interpretation of this verse led Martin Luther to question the prevailing doctrine of justification, ultimately precipitating the Protestant Reformation" (NBC, 840).

In some ways, Habakkuk's role and message are the opposite of that normally found among prophets. Instead of chiding Israel on God's behalf, Habakkuk confronts God himself, demanding an account of his actions, or lack of them. Many view questioning God as sinful, but Habakkuk and Job show this is not so. Rough times in life can produce honest doubt and perplexity, and God condemns

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neither Job nor Habakkuk for expressing these doubts. While an answer might not come immediately (2:1), God does not denounce honest questioning, only unbelief.

In the first part of our reading (1:1–4), the question is: "Why does wickedness go unpunished?" and in the second part (2:1–4), God's response is: "Judgment is coming, but you need to wait for it." In Habakkuk's day, as also today, great problems of injustice can be found everywhere, even among God's people. Rather than condoning sin or asking that it be ignored, the prophet calls for punishment as required by God's own covenant.

Habakkuk is introduced with a term (מַשָּׂא, *masa*), from the Hebrew verb "to carry, lift" (נשׂא), usually taken in prophetic literature as a burdensome message from the LORD, so as "oracle" or "utterance" (NET). However, as it is followed by the words "which Habakkuk the prophet saw," it does suggest more a raising or transport in ascent (Clines et al., 2009, 246–47, n.6), so it could be translated: "The lifting/transport/vision which Habakkuk the prophet saw." Though Habakkuk certainly carries the burden of seeing wickedness and injustice all around him (v. 3, last verb), God gave him eyes to understand his earthly realities in the light of God's transcendent nature and purposes. The whole book therefore (including Habakkuk's questions, the Lord's responses and the prayer or psalm in ch. 3), are all subsumed under this vision or oracle which Habakkuk saw.

Both verbs in verse 3 are causal (hiphil), so it could be rephrased as 'why do you cause/allow me to see and look at injustice and wrongdoing?' Habakkuk complains that God makes visible to him the wickedness of Israel, but he does not seem to be bringing judgment upon them, nor defending the oppressed.

The translation of 2:2 is a bit tricky. Alter says literally it reads: "so that he may run in reading it," but it could mean so that one may read it readily or clearly. Moses made clear the words of Torah at the beginning and end of Deuteronomy (1:5; 27:8), and this is what God's heralds today are also called to do in their preaching.

JSB says 2:3 is associated in Jewish tradition with the coming of the Messiah and this is reflected in the 12th Principle of Faith by Maimonides, stated as: *the belief in the arrival of the messiah and the messianic era.*

The translation of 2:4 is also tricky! JSB says: the righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity, often translated "the righteous one lives (or shall live) by his faith" or "the righteous one shall live through (or is sustained by) his faith". According to one of the rabbis in *b. Mak.* 23b, this saying encapsulates all the commandments. The saying also had an important influence in Christianity, and in particular in the doctrine of justification through faith (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38–39). In its original context, the saying is clearly interwoven with the first part of the verse. The saying there focuses on a person whose life is swollen and crooked. Then the verse moves to the opposite pole, a pious person who keeps his or her trust in the Lord under the dire circumstances described in the book, i.e. when the righteous are asked to wait while those who do not deserve worldly power wield it over them. Given the general focus in the book on Babylonia and its wickedness, readers may have understood the negative character in the first line as pointed at the king of Babylonia, as an archetypal representative of both the Babylonian empire and any proud people who rely on their own power (JSB).

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Psalm 119:137–144. God is just and his judgments just. This stanza is a great example of the two sides of Habakkuk's feelings! He states his belief positively: *You* are righteous and your judgments are upright. This is the theme in this set of readings today! Also, God's word is pure and, like Habakkuk, he loves it! He continues: Your righteousness (is) righteous forever and your law is true. Your testimonies (are) righteous forever, cause me to understand and I will live.

But, like Habakkuk, the psalmist's zeal for God's righteousness and honour burdens him, as he sees the enemies of God's word all around him, forgetting and rebelling against it. He is conflicted: Distress and hardship find me, yet your commandments are my delight. Maybe there are times when we too share the same emotional tension as the psalmist and Habakkuk.

2 Thessalonians 1:1–12. Evidence of God's Righteous Judgment. Our reading divides into an opening (vv. 1–2) and a thanksgiving (vv. 3–12). The apostle Paul commends the Thessalonians for their abundant faith and love in the midst of persecution (vv. 3–4), comforts them with the just judgment of God whereby they will be rewarded and their persecutors punished (5–10) and finally challenges them in his closing prayer report to continue in their worthy conduct (vv. 11–12; Beale).

This passage seems soaked in references to Isaiah 66. Verse 6 reflects the close of Isaiah 66:6, where the voice of the Lord repays his enemies for all they deserve. Although sinful humanity often abuses the OT principle of *lex talionis* (the *law of retribution*, where the punishment resembles the offense in kind and degree), the just God never does so. As we have seen, he is just and all his judgements are just! Beale says: "Paul uses this OT principle to comfort the Thessalonians by pointing them to the future judgment as the time when the injustice of their present suffering will be redressed."

The occasion at which the Thessalonian believers will be rewarded and their persecutors punished (vv. 7b–8a) is the return of Christ, who will come "from heaven, with his mighty angels, in a flame of fire." This reflects Isaiah 66:15, highlighting not so much the divine presence as the judgment that will take place. Paul uses the imagery of a flaming fire to portray in a powerful manner the frightening judgment that awaits those who have been oppressing the Thessalonian believers. Also, the clause "give vengeance" occurs in several LXX passages (Num 31:3; Deut 32:35; 2 Sam 4:8; 22:48; Ps 18:47; Ezek 25:14, 17), but again it alludes to Isaiah 66:15. In all these passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, the one who gives vengeance is Yahweh, but here it is the Lord Jesus at his return!

The chilling judgment is spelled out (v. 9) as the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might. This echoes the triple refrain in Isaiah 2:10, 19, and 21. Again, in the OT it refers to Yahweh but here to the Messiah! How much this judgment is in contrast to the believers, who will be "with the Lord forever" (1 Thes 4:17; 5:10).

The future return (v. 10a) states he will "be glorified in his holy ones," which alludes to Psalm 88:8 in the LXX (89:7 English). Again, there, the context is speaking of God, YHWH and YHWH God of Hosts, but here it is speaking of Christ. Also, there "the assembly of the holy ones" refers to angels but here to the believers! We may ask, what exactly does it mean "glorified in"? It is probably best taken in the locative sense: Christ's glorification takes place *in the presence of* believers, which agrees well with the meaning in Psalm 88:8 LXX and also contrasts well with the fate of the tormentors, who will be excluded from the presence of the Lord in verse 9.

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Beale says: The words in verse 12 again quote Isaiah 66:5 LXX, which originally addressed those in Israel who were being despised and mocked for their faith in God. In the LXX: "Speak, our brothers, to those who hate you and detest you, so that the name of the Lord may be glorified, and may be seen in gladness; but they shall be put to shame." Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians who are similarly suffering opposition and ridicule for their newly found faith is that they may fulfil every good desire and work of faith (v. 11), such that "the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified." Again, as in other quotations from Isaiah 66, the name *YWHW* in the Hebrew is changed to *Lord/Kurios* in the Greek Septuagint, and then to *the Lord Jesus* here in Paul's reference (see also JANT here). Paul clearly believed the Lord Jesus was YWHW incarnate!

Luke 19:1–10. Seeking and Saving the Lost. Luke's Gospel sets out Jesus' "Coming," (up to 9:50), and then (from 9:51), he sets out the "Going" or "Exodus" to "the far country." We can clearly see here that Jesus is on a journey (18:31, 35; 19:1, 4,5, 7, 9, 10) and this phase of the Going deals with the ultimate reign of Christ. On this journey, some recognised him as "the Son of David" and found salvation:

1. One out of ten lepers (17:15–19),
2. A blind man at Jericho, who had his sight restored by Jesus, and followed him (18:35–43),
3. Our reading, about Zacchaeus, who wanted "to see who Jesus was," and what he saw led him to a thorough-going conversion. Salvation came to his house (19:1–10).

Zacchaeus had lost his way, searching for acceptance via the accumulation of wealth. He was "a chief tax collector" in Jericho, a Roman customs centre, and as such, he would organise other tax collectors and collect healthy commissions (NET). Tax collectors were most likely Jews in Rome's employ and were regarded as traitors and known for corrupt practices (JANT). His name is from the Hebrew for righteous or upright (JANT) but he was anything but! Zacchaeus' shortness is almost like a metaphor of how he felt inside, compared with the crowd around him. NET says: "A sycamore tree would have large branches near the ground like an oak tree and would be fairly easy to climb. These trees reach a height of some 50 ft (about 15 m)." But Jesus sought this lost man and showed him who *he* was, and who Zacchaeus was.

The wording is very moving: Jesus said (literally): "Hastening, come down …" and of Zacchaeus it says: "and hastening, he came down"! In the words: *I must stay,* Jesus revealed the necessity of his associating with people like Zacchaeus (5:31–32). This act of fellowship indicated acceptance (NET). Jesus rescued him from his lostness by coming personally to his home and bringing a sense of acceptance with God right into his very heart. Of Zacchaeus, it says: "he welcomed him joyfully." NET notes: "Luke likes to mention joy as a response to what God was doing (1:14; 2:10; 10:20; 13:17; 15:5, 32; 19:37; 24:41, 52)."

Through being accepted, Zacchaeus discovered his true identity, a *son of Abraham*, that rich ancestor of his, who was first justified by his faith and then lived to justify his profession of faith by his works (Gen 22; Jam 2:21–23; Gooding). Beale says: "Zacchaeus' resolve is an expression not only of his willingness to restore the damage that he has caused but also of his inward transformation resulting from his encounter with Jesus." See also the reference to a "daughter of Abraham" in 13:16.

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The crowds complained now, as did the Pharisees previously (15:2), at Jesus' reception of "sinners." Being the *guest of a man who is a sinner* was a common complaint about Jesus: Luke 5:31–32; 7:37–50; 15:1–2 (NET). But Jesus declares "Salvation has come to this household." This is one of the few uses of the specific term *salvation* in Luke (1:69, 71, 77), though the concept runs throughout the Gospel. His salvation led to a completely changed attitude to his social responsibilities. If Zacchaeus was going to reign with Christ in Christ's coming administration, he needed to learn and practise the Christian attitude to wealth in this present age (Gooding). As we have seen above, to profess conversion and to be a son of Abraham, and to carry on behaving in disobedience to God's law is a contradiction in terms.

When Jesus referred to himself as "the Son of Man" he was probably referring to the apocalyptic Redeemer mentioned in Daniel 7:13–14 and 1 Enoch 71. Here is a beautifully succinct summary of Jesus' mission: *The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost!* Again, Beale: This "echoes Yahweh's self-description in Ezek 34:16 LXX as the true shepherd who will seek and save the lost sheep of Israel … Jesus describes his mission in terms of the will of Yahweh, who seeks out the lost in Israel, healing and restoring the people who have been mistreated by Israel's leaders."

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 1:10–20. Rite and Right. "Building on the simile of v. 9, the prophet sarcastically addresses the leaders and people of Jerusalem as if they were leaders and residents of ancient Sodom and Gomorrah. The sarcasm is appropriate, for if the judgment is comparable to Sodom's, that must mean that the sin which prompted the judgment is comparable as well" (NET). Isaiah speaks powerfully in v. 10 with the command to "give ear/pay attention to the torah of our God." Torah here refers not just "to mere teaching, but to corrective teaching and rebuke" (NET).

Isaiah condemns his contemporaries, their religious rites (the "empty/vain offerings" v. 13; "trampling my courtyards" v. 12) are useless, because they are not accompanied by ethical action. JSB sums up the challenge neatly with its heading: "Rite and Right." Alter says: "It is not a pitch for the abolition of sacrifices but rather an argument against a mechanistic notion of sacrifice, against the idea that sacrifice can put a man in good standing with God, regardless of human behaviour. The point becomes entirely clear at the end of v. 15, when the prophet says it is hands stained with blood stretched out in prayer to God that are utterly abhorrent to God." The end of v. 13 sums it up with alliteration as "sin and assemblies," or as Alter puts it "crime and convocations." God is not able to stomach iniquity and assembly combined! God's visceral rejection of such is emphasised in v. 14, literally: Your new-moon-festivals and your appointed-times hates my soul! The last word *naphshi* is an emotive personal pronoun for God!

Verses 16-20 are an invitation to repentance and ethical action, not just emotion but social and ethical action in everyday behaviour. The description of "your sins like red/scarlet" may refer back to the blood-stained hands in v. 15, probably referring not just to the blood from their sacrifices, but also the blood from their innocent victims. NET says: "By depriving the poor and destitute of proper legal recourse and adequate access to the economic system, the oppressors have, for all intents and purposes, 'killed' their victims."

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J. A. Motyer (*The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 47) suggests that these three statements (v. 17a-c) provide "the contrast between the two ends of imperfect society, the oppressor and the needy, the one inflicting and the other suffering the hurt. Isaiah looks for a transformed society wherever it needs transforming."

NET translates v. 18 as: "Come let us consider your options," as it says this is a judicial context, so not really about "reasoning together," but more about the nation's options for the future.

Note too the parallelism in verses 19–20, literally: "you will eat the good produce … you will be eaten by the sword." NET says: "The wordplay in the Hebrew draws attention to the options. The people can obey, in which case they will 'eat' v. 19 (תֹּאכֵלוּ [*toʾkhelu*], Qal active participle of אָכַל) God's blessing, or they can disobey, in which case they will be devoured (*Heb* 'eaten,' תְּאֻכְּלוּ, [*téʾukkélu*], Qal passive/Pual of אָכַל) by God's judgment." There may be a play too on the Hebrew concept of "the mouth of the sword" (the blade!) and "the mouth of the LORD" speaking.

Psalm 32. The Happinesses of Repentance. The title labels this psalm a *maskil* (מַשְׂכִּיל), probably from the verb "to be wise, prudent." NET suggests translation options as: "a contemplative song," "a song imparting moral wisdom," or "a skillful [i.e., well-written] song." The verb also occurs in verse 8: "*I will cause you to be wise* and direct you in the way you should walk."

The psalm is "a confession in the perfect tense" (Alter), which sets out the psalmist's state: he admits he has sinned and affirms that he has confessed it, and so he delights in the fact that God has forgiven him. Alter's translation of verse 1 is powerful: "Happy, of sin forgiven, absolved of offense," and he notes: "Two passive verbs as the object of forgiveness." The opening word "happy" is plural, and refers to the security and relief one experiences when God forgives us: "O the blessednesses of …" How much this psalm contrasts with the wicked ones who burdened Habakkuk's heart!

True confession refuses to deny or hide sin ("in whose spirit there is no deceit" v. 2) but openly confesses it to God. If one remains silent (v. 3), refusing to confess one's sin, it can have "severe physical consequences" (NET). The psalmist's statement in verse 4 reflects his perspective. As far as he was concerned, it seemed as if the Lord was trying to kill him. His time of suffering is like the oppressive heat of summer. Following his honest confession to God, the psalmist declares "*You* (emphatic) lift the iniquity of my sin"—God carries away the burden and guilt of his sin! So, refusal to repent can lead to physical consequences, but heartfelt confession can bring healing and release. Such people are called "the faithful" *chasid* (חָסִיד), and this is the word used by Chasidic Jews today.

In verses 8–9 the object turns to second person singular. It could be that the psalmist is now teaching each listener individually, based on what he has learned, or it may be a change to the Lord addressing the psalmist. The term "let me counsel you with my eye" is not a known idiom but "the eye" is often a metaphor of knowledge and wisdom. The psalm closes with a call to joyful praise to the "righteous ones" *tsaddiqim* (צַדִּיקִים), and to "all the upright of heart."

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