



Ord Sunday 27

# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

**If only you had faith you could...**

**Failure in the Church is always a failure of faithfulness**

## ***The upright person lives by their faithfulness***

Habakkuk is very much a prophet for contemporary times. Ministering around 604/5 B.C. he reaches out to the people of Israel just as the Babylonians defeat the Assyrians and begin their long, brutal path to power and colonial conquests of Palestine. He kept his focus on the hot issue of justice – how do people find justice in an unjust world? At its simplest, his answer is – true and abiding justice can only be found with and in Yahweh and faithfulness to the divine expectations.

Very much in the mould of earlier prophets, Habakkuk insists that faith without justice is no genuine faith and in proclaiming this message, he turns his attention to the great institutions of Israel – particularly to the Temple and the priesthood – and asks what is the point of all of this if the weak, the powerless, the refugees, prisoners, widows and orphans are exploited by those who have the upper hand? Great liturgy does not in any way guarantee a happy Yahweh!

## ***The wicked surround the righteous and so perverted justice reigns***

Translations of this verse (1:4) vary but my understanding of what Habakkuk is saying here is how once people begin to abandon the core elements of their faith and tradition and instead take on the “ways of the world” all around them (without divine discernment) what ensues is a perversion of justice. He is not condemning everything on offer through engagement with these cultures. Instead he urges the people to begin all renewals with God and the expectations of God – as found in the revealed world of God in the Torah and the prophets, in the faith of their ancestors. Faithfulness to what they rediscover there will transform not just Israel, but the world itself.

There are significant nuances in the Book’s Hebrew that is difficult to translate but when we read words and phrases such as *violence*, *plunder*, the verb *to cry out* and *strife* we know we are looking at core prophetic ways of speaking of a breakdown in the legal/theological system that is meant to be shaping God’s people. True religion for Habakkuk is not about personal spirituality but about justice, equity, compassion, mercy and charity in political, juridical, economic, environmental and religious life in the land. Why is that? It is because these are characteristics of God and men and women are created in that divine image and likeness. It is why the Torah was handed down by God on Mt Sinai. At the very heart of our own lives must be the vibrant life of God.

To ignore the plight of one suffering person; to turn a blind eye to a single act of injustice; to fail to take the initiative in reaching out in compassion to ease the burdens crushing the people of the land is to forsake one’s religious responsibilities. For this punishment is coming. It is not that Yahweh is going to punish them. On the horizon are the clouds of war from the horses and chariots of the Babylonian army. They will destroy Israel, pull down the Holy City of Jerusalem and burn the Temple to the ground. That will happen because of the hubris of the leaders of the nation; because of their selfishness, their unfaithfulness and their unwillingness to align themselves with the saving works of God in human history.

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### ***The only limit to a vision of a new world is a failure in faith***

In our Gospel today we find Jesus talking to the apostles about the power that comes with faith. They are clearly struggling with wondering just how they are going to manage to live out some of the teachings that have just been given. How are they to form faith communities built on some of these teachings? What is demanded of them is too unrealistic, too demanding and impossible to live out in daily life. This is especially true in the Greco-Roman world that seeks to dominate and change the way people live with God. Nowhere is this more powerfully visible than in the move towards turning earthly rulers into gods. If humans can become divine beings, who needs God?

Jesus knows this and seeks to reassure them and empower them for what is to happen at the end of their journey in Jerusalem. If they have a genuine faith, then that faith will bring about the unimaginable and what the world might believe to be impossible. The Twelve understand the problems and it is they who come to Jesus and ask for the gift of faith. This is an important note. It means they are beginning to understand the need for divine help in their daily struggles to live as faithful disciples. They cannot manage on their own, with their own resources and gifts.

This is evident in Matthew's version of the teaching where the evangelist is responding to the failure of the disciples to carry out an exorcism on a small boy. They found themselves unable to cast out the demon without the enhancing power of God working through them. God casts out the evil spirit and uses the man or woman of faith to achieve that victory. It is the way of all faith activities.

### ***Faith is Faith – size does not matter***

While the disciples come with a request for an increase in the amount of faith that they already have, Luke's Jesus responds by insisting that it is not about the amount of faith but about the true nature of their faith. With what might be called a *genuine faith*, only the smallest possible amount is required. With genuine faith it is possible to do what seems to be the impossible – even doing what is patently absurd - planting a fruit bearing tree in the sea! Wondrous powers come with and are the reward of *true faith*, a faith that is lived in day to day life, a faith witnessed to by *love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control* (Galatians 5:22). Faith cannot be expressed in creeds alone. It needs to flow out into our words and our deeds, shaping us to become the world's light and leaven as is demanded of us by Christ himself.

### ***Woe to those who say to wood “wake up”***

I love this line in Habakkuk (2:19) because in many ways it highlights one of his great concerns, a problem for every generation of believers. He observes how easy it is to turn “things” of this world into gods and then rely on them to bring salvation. In time these things become unquestionable positions on which society is built up, generation after generation. Thus, today we live in a world where the UN has become the arbiter of human rights and the meaning of life. Politicians determine right to life, define human sexuality, transform the eternal nature of marriage, decide what is and is not a human right, limit freedom of religion and then leave it to lawyers and judges to enforce these laws. Science tells us if it cannot be measured it is not real. These are the things against which the prophet and Luke's Church are struggling in their own ways. These are the “gods” ruling over the world and they do not appear to be bringing about the kind of society envisaged by God and proclaimed by Jesus. Getting back to basics is what our readings are teaching us today.