6 October 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

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O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you Violence! and you will not save?

I love the prophecy of Habakkuk: three chapters full of honesty, of grief and pain and near-despair expressed in unflinchingly direct language, and of hope. I love it because of its honesty – because Habakkuk, like so many other people in the Bible, refuses to accept injustice, and refuses to accept the silence of God. Throughout this short book, Habakkuk the prophet speaks prophetically: his words to God are raw and candid, naming injustice and violence, challenging God’s response, and yet finally asserting his hope – hope based in faith in the goodness and glory of God whom he challenges not out of rebelliousness, but out of trust that God can and will act.

And I think we too are called to be prophetic. Like Habakkuk, we need to name our experience. Like Habakkuk, if we are afraid, despairing, in pain – we must tell the truth about that to ourselves, to one another, and to God. And as they did for Habakkuk, real hope and real faith can flow out of that honesty – for us and for those around us.

For – like Habakkuk – we live in violent times. The media is full of the rhetoric and the reality of violence; violence of word and thought, and the threat of violence in deed. The Prime Minister has recently been criticised for the violence of his language in the House of Commons itself. The nation is divided. There are violent protests. Civil unrest and riots abroad.

Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise.

We, like Habakkuk, see violence, destruction, strife and contention around us. Many of us, like him, might be angry with God. How can God have let things get to this state?

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you Violence! and you will not save?
We might be in anxiety and despair about the current state of our political establishment; anxious about what will happen on the 31st October, anxious about what this may or may not mean. We might be sickened by the way the last three years have split country, communities and families – about the deep divisions exposed in our nation, and perhaps even in ourselves. We might be anxious about other aspects of politics – about what has been ignored in favour of the Brexit debate, about crisis of funding for the NHS, or the continuing impact of austerity, or politics abroad. We might be anxious about racism, or anti-Semitism, or terrorism. And there is good reason to be anxious.

We might – perhaps in response to recent media coverage, or the work of activists like Greta Thunberg, or the Creationtide sermons of the last four weeks – be newly convinced of the scale of climate crisis.

Or we might be experiencing our own private grief, or family sickness, or sharing the pain of a friend.

If any of those resonate with your experience – as they do with mine – know that they also resonate with Habakkuk’s. And learn from his example that, when we are in those places of darkness, anxiety, despair and pain – God is not offended by our anger. God values our honesty. God calls us to pray with sincerity, to tell the truth. Because unless we begin sincerely, with the truth of our experience, of the injustice which we see and the pain which we bear, our faith has no integrity and no foundation.

When the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, his response isn’t altogether helpful. Jesus is pointing out that they’re starting from the wrong premise. They ask him to increase their faith – to add more to the faith they already have. But faith isn’t like that. It’s not quantifiable. It’s not a substance of which you can have more or less, and it isn’t obtained by asking a single question and then passively waiting. Faith is faith – and what matters is that faith is sincere, is based in honesty, is rooted in a willingness to speak the truth to God and wait for God’s response; and is willing to blossom and flower into action.

Just as Habakkuk does.

If we deny the reality of difficulty and danger – if we refuse to recognise that the world we live in is a place of division and darkness and pain – there can be no hope. Habakkuk teaches us to acknowledge reality to ourselves and to God. God doesn’t need us to deny reality – God knows what is really happening. And what God asks of us is honesty.
In the middle of our reading, Habakkuk tells God that he will not be satisfied until God answers. Silence is not good enough. He waits in hope that is active: actively waiting, actively watching, with active faith that leads him to action.

*I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart*
*I will keep watch to see what he will say to me*
*and what he will answer concerning my complaint.*

And God responds: with a promise of hope.

*there is still a vision for the appointed time... wait for it, it will surely come, it will not delay.*

God does answer. God will answer. Faith will be rewarded. Hope will not be disappointed. Answers don’t come immediately; nor, indeed, always in a way that’s immediately reassuring. But God does answer.

Our faith doesn’t have to be a certain size; we don’t have to ask for more faith, or for the right things. We don’t have to prove ourselves by how we pray. We can bring our anger and bitterness and pain to God and know that God will answer. It’s not easy. But it is honest.

So: keep calling out to God for answers. Keep complaining at injustice. Keep telling God that silence is not good enough. Keep faithful; keep hopeful.

But when God does answer, be prepared for that answer to involve you. Be prepared for God to tell you to put your faith into action. Be prepared for God to call you to do more than pray.

For faith, as Jesus reminded the disciples, is not quantifiable; it’s not passive; it exists when it is expressed, in action and response.

The book of Habakkuk finishes with a hymn. *Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines... yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation.*

May we have faith like Habakkuk: faith to see reality clearly and to take it to God with righteous anger. Faith to wait for God’s answer, waiting actively and in hopeful expectation. Faith to exult in the God of our salvation even when that salvation seems very far away. Faith to hear God’s answer when it comes; and faith to push us out into action. Faith that, as we respond to God’s call, makes us the light of hope in the darkness.