**From fear to faith**  7/6/20 dkm

Read: Habakkuk 3, Philippians 4

Text: Habakkuk 3:16-19

Psalms: 42:1-5, 119:113-120, 18:29-36

The best known words from this book of the Bible are probably those found in verse 14 of chapter 2: ‘The just shall live by his faith’. The apostle Paul quotes these words in Romans 1:17, words that gripped the heart of Martin Luther in 1517 and would not let him go. Other well-known words from the Book of Habakkuk are those found in the closing verses, paraphrased in the song: ‘Though the fig tree does not blossom and there be no fruit on the vine, yet will I rejoice in the Lord’. One commentator refers to these words as, ‘one of the most powerful statements of faith in the Scriptures’ and another, ‘one of the strongest affirmations of faith in all Scripture’.

Benjamin Franklin was not a Christian but apparently knew these words. While serving as a diplomat in Paris, his sophisticated but Bible-despising friends mocked him for his admiration of the Bible. He suspected they knew little of the Bible. One evening he came to a meeting with these cultured folk, carrying a copy of an ancient poem he had been reading. He said it was a beautiful poem and asked if they wanted to hear it read. And so Franklin read the closing words of the third chapter of Habakkuk. His audience was full of admiration for such magnificent poetry. Where did it come from? How could they get a copy? They were taken aback when told these beautiful words came from the Bible!

Habakkuk began this book questioning God about the corruption, violence and injustice he saw around him. God answered his complaint telling Habakkuk that he was bringing the Babylonian army to punish these wicked people. Habakkuk was horrified; how could God allow such wicked men as the Babylonians devour people more righteous than themselves (1:13). He was confused, thinking that this was no answer to the problem of evil. But he waited to see what the Lord would say. The Lord answered, saying in effect, ‘My ways are not your ways’ and God times are not your times (Isa 55:9). ‘The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him’ (2:20). In his time God would destroy the Babylonians because of their wickedness, especially their idolatry.

When Habakkuk heard all that the Lord spoke he was afraid (3:2). When he remembered the mighty acts of God as recorded in the Bible, God dividing the Red Sea and the Jordan River, his coming down on Mt Sinai, and his destruction of the Canaanites, he was even more afraid. He was not questioning a man, he was questioning almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth and judge of all people. He felt a bit like Job: ‘I have heard you… but now my eyes see you’ (Job 42:5). Habakkuk says, ‘When I heard my body trembled’ (3:16). Habakkuk no longer feared the Babylonians, he feared almighty God. We will look at what Habakkuk says as he concludes his prayer under four subheadings: Fear, facts, faith and feet.

**1. Fear**

A friend of mine was so busy with his studies he decided to pray as he walked through the park on his way to university. This idea lasted about a week. Our prayers are effective when we are on our knees before the Lord and indeed trembling before almighty God. Prayer is not something we can do ‘on the run’, as it were. It is not something to be squeezed into, or indeed out of, our busy days.

Listen to Habakkuk’s admission of how he felt after hearing the Lord speak to him. His whole body shook, he felt sick in the stomach and his lips quivered (3:16). We speak of being traumatised by something we see or hear. Our bodies react by trembling, we cannot speak and we feel sick and even vomit. Nothing in all the world is more fearful than almighty God when he is angry; and he gets angry at sin. ‘Are we talking about the same God?’ you might ask. ‘This is not the God revealed in Jesus’ you might say. Let me remind you that Jesus pronounced more woes upon the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 24 than the Lord pronounced upon the Babylonians here in Habakkuk 2. It is in the NT that we read, ‘It is fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ and, ‘for our God is a consuming fire’ (Heb 10:31, 12:29). Kneeling or standing when we pray is more indicative of an attitude of reverence and awe (Heb 12:28).

Was Habakkuk trembling at the reminder of God’s great deliverance in the past, or at what God was about to do in Jerusalem and then in Babylon? Either or both are possible but the ‘heard’ of verse 16 relates back to the ‘heard’ of verse 2 and the message he had just heard from the Lord. In the midst of hearing about Babylon’s coming destruction however, Habakkuk heard the Lord say, ‘The just shall live by his faith’ (2:4). So in the midst of his trembling he said, ‘Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble’ (3:16 ESV). Habakkuk believed what the Lord said about bringing Babylon to punish the wicked in his city, and what he said about destroying Babylon further into the future. He accepted without further questioning the wisdom and justice of God.

It is okay to ask God what he plans to do about evil as it confronts us or our family or our nation. It is okay to ask God to stop wicked people attacking us, but ultimately we must pray, ‘Not my will but yours be done’. As long as we are in this fallen world we will face evil, and we will keep praying, ‘Deliver us from evil’. We will face trials and troubles, but we know Jesus has overcome this world (John 16: 33). In the midst of the storms of life we can find a place of quiet rest; that place is the Lord himself. This was the truth revealed to Habakkuk the prophet.

**2. Facts**

Habakkuk progressed from fear to patiently waiting for the Lord to fulfil his declared will. He will progress even further into faith and joy in the Lord, but not before facing the facts. There is no such thing as ‘blind faith’ in the Bible. Believers do not ignore the facts of history, geography, or science. Our faith is not detached from reality; it takes full account of reality, unlike other so-called ‘faiths’ or religions.

The reality to which Habakkuk refers is the situation in Jerusalem leading up to and during the siege of Jerusalem in 586BC. The Babylonians came rampaging across the land destroying crops and flocks, and trees and vineyards. Even before this there was drought and famine. During the siege food became scarce. In prison Jeremiah was given a piece of bread each day, ‘until all the bread in the city was gone’ (Jer 37:21). The situation may have been getting bad even as Habakkuk wrote and prayed the amazing words of verse 17.

In most memorable poetry Habakkuk describes the situation he was about to face. Figs and grapes were the delights that God’s people enjoyed in the Promised Land. They also had their grain crops of course, and olives for oil as well as for eating. Habakkuk anticipates a complete failure of these crops. On the green hills they grazed sheep and goats for milk and meat. Habakkuk anticipated the flocks of Israel being cut off by the enemy. It was a desperate situation that he and the people of Jerusalem faced.

We have faced terrible droughts in our nation, none more so than in recent days, but we have not faced famine and starvation. What would happen if our food supplies were cut off? How would people react? We get some indication by listening to those who lose their homes in a bushfire, or those told they have cancer. For some it is weeping and despair, while others say, ‘I am going to fight this cancer and beat it?’ I have not yet heard anyone say they are going to fight coronavirus and beat it! What was Habakkuk’s response to the dire situation he describes?

**3. Faith**

In the face of calamity some try to deny or escape reality. They keep busy with work or with partying so as not to think about realities, such as death. Some take to drink and drugs to stop them thinking about realities. Is this what Habakkuk did? No. Others become stoical, putting on a ‘stiff upper lip’ as we say, maybe after being told, ‘Pull yourself together man!’ They appear to be unmoved by unpleasant realities. Is this what Habakkuk did? No. Yet others adopt an aggressive attitude, like the person who fights cancer, or stands against a storm, or is going to stop climate change. Is this what Habakkuk did? No. Habakkuk resolved to trust in the Lord in a desperate and seemingly hopeless situation. Those who trust in the Lord of course, know that no situation is hopeless because God is powerful to save.

Habakkuk was not like the ten men who came back from spying out Canaan and saying, ‘But we will not go up’. Habakkuk believed the Lord and accepted the dire situation which he faced saying, ‘Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation’ (3:18). What an incredible response to calamity or disaster. He believed that God was able to both destroy and save, that God would, ‘in wrath remember mercy’ (3:2). ‘When God becomes our all-consuming reality, our problems begin to take their proper perspective in relation to His greatness and ability to handle them’.

The way ahead for Habakkuk was to rejoice in the Lord, to ‘joy in the God of my salvation’ (3:18). True joy is not to be found in the things of this world because ‘the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal’ (2Cor 4:18). Habakkuk was upset at what was happening in his city, and fearful of the Lord’s plan to deal with the evil. But the Lord showed him the bigger picture, which included the destruction of Babylon, and when he recalled the mighty works of God in the past he was assured of God’s power to save the righteous, including himself. The bigger picture was of what is not seen, of God on his throne in heaven ruling over the nations with absolute power and great glory.

No matter how dark the days, we know almighty God is with us; he will never leave us or forsake us. This was his promise to Joshua, to Habakkuk, and to you (Josh 1:5, Heb 13:5). With such a promise we can rejoice in the Lord even as we suffer the loss of a job, loss of possessions, loss of a loved one, ridicule or persecution. Paul was in chains when he wrote, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!’ (Phil 4:4). He and Silas prayed and sang to the Lord from their prison cell. Paul knew the fundamental truth revealed to Habakkuk, ‘The just shall live by faith’. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, whom we do not see, and we live by faith in Jesus Christ, whom we will see when he returns in power and great glory.

**4. Feet**

Living by faith means the Lord is with us every step of the way. He gives us strength to take each step (3:19). ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13). Paul said this in the context of being content in any and every situation; strength is not just physical but psychological and emotional. We are in a spiritual battle against an unseen enemy called Satan. People today are fearful of an unseen virus attacking their body making them sick and even killing them. This virus is real but so is Satan, the enemy of our souls. We pray that soon we will have a vaccine with power stop this virus, but we already have the power overcome Satan- he is called Jesus Christ the Lord.

Like the psalmist, the prophet pictures a deer walking narrow paths in the steep hills (3:19, Ps 18:33). Not only does the Lord give strength, he guides each step we take such that we do not stumble or stray from the path. With the Lord guiding us and giving us strength night and day we press on, as sure-footed as a mountain deer. Wars will be there. Famine and pestilence will be there. Yet above all, the Lord will be there with us bringing us to our heavenly home in Christ Jesus. This was the focus of Habakkuk. Is it your focus in life? Are your eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of your faith, ‘who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 12:2)?