

First Impressions 27th SUNDAY -C-

Habakkuk 1: 2-3, 2: 2-4 Psalm 95 2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14 Luke 17: 5-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The prophet Habakkuk lived in the chaotic period during the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ when the Babylonians ruled. But his lament could be prayed in too many modern settings to count Zimbabwe, Dafur, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, Guatemala, etc. Many nations and peoples could cry out with Habakkuk, “How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen. I cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not intervene....Destruction and violence are before me, there is strife and clamorous discord.” I imagine that a prayer service for any of the victims suffering violence, starvation, and forced migrations throughout the world could use today’s Habakkuk reading as an opening prayer. As could those living in our inner cities, who have to deal with unsafe neighborhoods, poor education for their children and unemployment.

The prophet’s language is bold and might make the pious uncomfortable. How dare anyone speak in such a manner to God! Who do we creatures think we are, anyway? But prophets and saints have no such qualms about being so blunt and honest with God. They trust their relationship with God is strong enough to stand the strongest complaints. You can say anything to a really close friend; lay out your feelings with all their raw emotions. There are situations that are so bad, when a people have nowhere else to turn and God is the only one to complain to and the only One who will listen with a sympathetic ear. Who else has the power to change the dreadful situations that are beyond mere human effort? Like Habakkuk, with tears in our eyes, we look out at the seeming insurmountable evils in the world and lament, “What’s taking you so long, O God?!”

The threats confronting Habakkuk and the people of Judah weren’t only from outside oppressors like the Babylonians. The death of the reformer King Josiah brought to power his son, Jehoiakim, who reversed his father’s attempts to improve the nation and the lot of the people. Habakkuk cried out against the corruption of Judah’s leaders and warned that the Babylonians would soon be instruments of divine punishment. How hard it is when ordinary people suffer at the hands of their own corrupt military and political forces. Who can rescue those with no power; who can bring relief to those wearied by affliction? They have no earthly power to appeal to; so, they turn and cry out to God, “How long, O Lord?”

One of the prophet’s tasks is to name the pain the people experience and voice their lament. But the second part of the Habakkuk reading reflects another function of the prophet: to call a

suffering people to turn to God in faith and trust. It may seem that God has forgotten them in their misery, but the prophet encourages them, “For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment and will not disappoint.” God may not be giving a rapid solution to current difficulties; but God is giving a vision that a stressed people can place their hope in.

Habakkuk offers encouragement to those who are in dire straits and can’t help themselves. But what about the rest of us who hear God’s intentions to help those afflicted? Through the prophet we hear where God’s heart lies---with those who have no one on their side and can’t help themselves. So, hearing what God has promised these people, we are urged to do something for them, whether the victims of violence and injustice be local or across the globe. And for those already involved in efforts to help those suffering starvation, oppression, violence, plagues like AIDS, war, etc., the prophet’s vision can sustain us in our long efforts. The “vision” assures us that God is with us in our concern and labors with us to help us “keep on, keepin’ on.” People laboring to make a difference against seeming-impossible odds can succumb to discouragement and burn out. While the first part of the Habakkuk reading can serve as a prayer for those trapped by powerful and cruel forces; the second half is an encouragement to those who have heard the call to join in the struggle to free the oppressed and be hope for the hopeless.

The apostles in today’s gospel voice their sense of urgent need to Jesus. We have to consider the context of their request. Jesus has just finished instructing them of the serious consequences of causing another to sin (“better that a millstone be put around their neck....”) and has also told them they must forgive someone, even if that person “...wrongs you seven times a day.” It takes enormous faith to live Jesus’ teachings and face the demands of discipleship. A disciple can easily feel inadequate. Where to turn?—the disciples know—they ask Jesus, “Increase our faith.” They want more faith so that they can be the kind of disciples Jesus is teaching them to be.

But Jesus shifts their attention away from thinking about quantity to considering the quality of the faith they already have. Even a tiny bit of faith, “the size of a mustard seed,” can be very powerful and requires appropriate action. If we wait around for a dose of some imagined heroic faith, we are liable to sit on our hands and do nothing. Jesus is encouraging his followers to forget about how much faith they think or feel they have. They are to act on the faith they already have. For example, a person with “mustard seed faith,” hearing Habakkuk’s lament today, would set about doing something to make things right—whether it be in our immediate families, local church community or in the larger world in which we live.

We need, Jesus tells us, to have faith in the power of God. With just a little faith, we disciples

could accomplish great things. Jesus' listeners certainly would have been impressed by the example he gave of faith's ability to uproot the mulberry tree. It was notoriously hard to dig up. Its roots went deep, were very extensive and were strong enough to penetrate a rock foundation. Jesus invited the apostles, to trust in the faith they had and to act on it. No excuses about not having enough faith—that is just a delaying tactic, an excuse for inaction and shows a lack of faith in God's desire to work through our efforts. Jesus encourages us to take the risks necessary to set things right. On our own we might not be able to uproot deep seated evils and destructive patterns, but we can with our "mustard seed faith" in God.

Jesus tells a parable about a very hard-working servant who does what he or she is supposed to do. Disciples, equipped with "mustard seed faith" must set about doing the sometimes very hard work our faith urges us to do. All thoughts of reward or acknowledgment are to be put aside as distractions from the labors at hand. We who work in church ministry can get side-tracked from doing what needs to be done, if we place too much emphasis on our popularity, reputations or rate of success in accomplishing great projects. If we think we are so very important for what we have done, Jesus' sobering reminder should set us straight, "When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants, we have done what we were obliged to do.'"

Are we just useless servants after all? Are we only tools in God's tool box, useful for specific tasks, but mere instruments in God's hands to accomplish a divine plan that needs our cooperation and skills? Of course not. In fact, in our work for the Lord we accomplish a lot, sometimes immediately, but mostly over a life time of daily service and seeming insignificant labors. The parable of the servant reminds us to keep things in focus. Whether it be through herculean effort or day-to-day fidelity to our roles in life, our accomplishments come because the One who has called us to our tasks has worked through us. Is God grateful for our fidelity? Of course. But don't let it go to our heads; keep things in perspective. We are servants, we understand our roles. God doesn't owe us any guaranteed return on our labors. Our ministry will yield fruit---but how much and when, is in God's hands. We do what our God has called us to do. And aren't we thankful that we are not the ones in charge, but only servants?

QUOTABLE

Eighty-five members of the National Evangelical Association, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the papal ambassador to the United Nations are among a growing number of religious bodies and individuals encouraging their congregations and their political leaders to take active, practical steps to address the moral issue of global climate change.

Planet Earth is not only a gift, but a manifest expression of God's goodness and love. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas wrote that each creature represents an attribute of the divine that can be expressed by no other creature. Our fossil-fuel lifestyles are causing global warming and threatening life on this planet for millions of humans and for the countless other creatures who call Earth home.

Earth is home to all that we know and are yet to discover. As we have an obligation to care for any good entrusted to us, we have that same moral obligation to care for the entire community of life on Earth.

-----Sister Sharon Therese Zayac, OP

(for the full article go to our webpage www.preacherexchange.com And click on "Justice Preaching.")

JUSTICE NOTES

"For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late." (Habakkuk 2:2-4)

The vision of peace for our world, of God's Kingdom present now among us, of God's Life which is stronger than all our many forms of death, and of trust that God's Providence is always and everywhere at work, is a vision which "will not disappoint." It is a vision affirmed by Paul in today's letter to Timothy and by Jesus in his call to have faith. It is a vision to hold onto when we weep at the news of wars, violence and injustice in our world. It is a vision to make present daily in our interactions and relationships with family, friends and with our hurting world.

Our Catholic Popes and Bishops have put words to our hopes and visions of peace in many documents: *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*, November 1993 *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, 1983 and Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963. Following are some quotations from these documents with web addresses to read them in full. They provide words for graceful reflection.

"True peacemaking can be a matter of policy only if it is first a matter of the heart."

"Amid the violence of contemporary culture and in response to the growing contempt for human life, ***the Church must seek to foster communities where peaceable virtues can take root and be nourished.*** We need to nurture among ourselves *faith and hope* to strengthen our spirits by placing our trust in God, rather than in ourselves; *courage and compassion* that move

us to action; *humility and kindness* so that we can put the needs and interests of others ahead of our own; *patience and perseverance* to endure the long struggle for justice; and *civility and charity* so that we can treat others with respect and love.”

“Peace does not consist merely in the absence of war, but rather in sharing the goodness of life together.”

Did you know?

· “We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus.”

What can I do?

Read and absorb these documents on peace:

· <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/harvest.shtml>

· <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/John23/j23pacem.htm>

· *Be a peacemaker, pray daily for peace.*

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Note: A couple months ago I listed **Eric Queen’s** name as a recipient for postcards. Unfortunately, during the summer Eric committed suicide in a broom closet on death row. We pray for him and his family and for his fellow inmates who feel his loss.

Please write to:.....

- Fernando L. Garcia #0702066 (On death row since 4/19/01)
- Jim E. Haselden #0561943 (6/6/01)
- James Hollis Watts #0428143 (7/19/01)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606