

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 / Luke 17:5-19)
02.10.2016

Today's first reading – taken from the prophet Habakkuk – is a biblical text which raises the issue of suffering and in doing so poses many questions we ourselves might ask. Habakkuk wonders why the Lord is silent before the injustice, tyranny, violence and discord that surround him. The prophet cannot understand the Lord's way. He cannot fathom how the God of the promises made to Israel has seemingly abandoned His Chosen People.

Just like the psalmist who, on so many occasions and in diverse circumstances, asks why those who are deceitful and lack integrity are led to prosper, so Habakkuk also wonders that this should be the case. The Lord's seeming slowness to act before injustice clearly troubles Habakkuk.

We can sympathise with this prophet, can we not? Meaningless suffering and God's apparent failure to intervene can lead us to question the Lord's ways – and sometimes even to question His very existence.

In the latter part of today's reading, we hear the Lord speak to His servant promising him a vision. The insight given to Habakkuk with this vision remains God's unfailing word for us today.

The Lord calls upon his prophet and all those who will listen to Habakkuk's message to concentrate on living lives of uprightness and faithfulness themselves; lives firmly committed to the Lord, even and especially when they find themselves enduring all sorts of trials over which they have no control.

Habakkuk pleads that as God's People traverse the difficulties that are part of life, they dare to wait patiently upon the Lord, confident that He will act, show His concern and manifest His merciful love.

The same call – the call to have confidence and trust in God – is reiterated in today's gospel passage.

Jesus calls upon those to whom He speaks therein to live lives of faith.

Moreover, in a special way He bids those among His disciples to whom He has confided a particular ministry to exercise their responsibility in a spirit of humble service.

Jesus insists that humility of heart is an attitude which all men and women of faith should display in their whole way of being, whatever is asked of them: *When you have done all you have been told to do, say we are merely servants; we have done no more than our duty.*

It is good, truly salutary, to be reminded that we are all meant to live our lives in this way; to journey as humble servants at each step along life's way.

None of us should ever take ourselves to be more than what we are. We are all merely servants, whatever our role or status, whatever particular ministry is confided to us, whatever service is asked of us.

Without in any way contradicting Jesus' words in today's extract from Luke's gospel, it is good for us to remember what Jesus said to the disciples in John's gospel account when He declared that they are not only servants. As their Master Jesus also dared to call His disciples His friends.

By extension, as disciples and servants of Christ, we are also Jesus' friends, for, just as Christ made everything known to the disciples who walked life's road with Him, so He has made Himself known to us. Jesus has called each one of us into His confidence and trust and He has invited each one of us to share in His own filial relationship with the Father. We can hear

the Master's words first spoken to those who walked with Him as words spoken into our hearts as well: *I call you not only servants. I also call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father.*

Like Habakkuk, where we meet him at the beginning of today's first reading, even as the Lord's friends, we can be troubled by many things we witness going on around us – not only outside the fold of God's people, but also within the household of God. The many difficulties, ambiguities and even what might be called *the evil* we can encounter within the Church itself can shake us to the very foundations of our being. Some of us may even be tempted to lose faith.

When we find ourselves troubled by what we witness, the prophet's example can help and encourage us.

Habakkuk shows us that we should bring our concerns to God in prayer, daring to articulate them as they rise within our hearts. Just like Habakkuk, we should voice our dismay and bring to the fore the questions that are there welling up within us.

I am pretty sure that Habakkuk would have liked to receive clearer answers to his questions than what he was given to hear. I expect he would have preferred that God come down to sort everything out. But that is not what happened. It is not God's way to act in a heavy-handed manner.

We read how the Lord invited Habakkuk to wait patiently for a vision that would come slowly and be understood only progressively. All Habakkuk received through this vision was a little glimpse into God's unfailing faithfulness in contrast to His people's multiple infidelities.

Put simply, Habakkuk was given neither a clear word nor a firm solution. There was no massive statement from God, no grandiose act on His behalf.

The Lord's response was gentle and humble.

As much as Habakkuk was given was the understanding that in the midst of everything – including the most incomprehensible and profoundly disturbing – the Lord was to be found. He was at work. Habakkuk's message for us is that the Lord is always with us; that He is always there at work in His people's favour, even when this is not perceptible to our eyes. In saying that, I am led to think of that well-known passage found in Paul's Letter to the Romans in which the assurance is given to us that God works everything together for the good of His People – even the most terrible things His people encounter in their experience can be made work in their favour. The apostle Paul stresses that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ-Jesus.

Who or what can separate us from the love of God? Who or what can ever keep Christ's love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because He does not love us any more? No! Despite everything that appears to say the contrary, nothing can separate us from His love.

Habakkuk would surely concur with this New Testament insight.

The bottom line of the extract from Habakkuk's prophecy read this morning echoes the apostle Paul's invitation to the Romans to dare to trust that God is there in and through everything we traverse along life's way – even the most disturbing and challenging things we come across.

The prophet Habakkuk calls upon his listeners to exercise something the psalmist and so many other biblical writers (in both the Old and New Testaments) speak of and exhort us to

hold on to in our hearts: *trust in God*.

Again and again, the Scriptures present those they call *the wicked* to be men and women who are characterised by the fact that they trust only in themselves. In their pride *the wicked* are foolish enough to believe that they can make their own way in the world, relying on their personal strength alone.

Without necessarily being *wicked*, I suspect most of us will have experienced the consequences of holding such an attitude of foolish pride in our hearts at times. When we adopt such a stance and trust in ourselves alone what happens is that we trip ourselves up and fall. Such falls are salutary graces. They remind us upon whom we depend for true life.

The call addressed to us this morning through both the prophet and the gospel passage we have read is an invitation to trust in God with humble faith.

Habakkuk's message is at the same time a call to hope.

The prophet draws to our attention that our hope must be built upon the solid foundation of trust in God's loving kindness, which we see to be displayed in and through His unfailing fidelity in our regard.

Habakkuk stresses that we live – we really *live!* - by trusting in God.

This is the bottom line of today's first reading.

The Lord says: *the righteous one trusts in me and lives!*

We can find ourselves doing the seemingly impossible once we hold in our hearts the assurance to which the prophet calls us.

In today's gospel passage this message is taken up and reinforced.

It is implied through Jesus' words in the gospel extract we have heard read this morning that what appears impossible to human eyes can happen once we place our faith in God's help. Matthew's parallel of Luke's gospel account adds this little line: *If only you had faith nothing would be impossible to you.*

Clearly, the faith Jesus speaks of is a mysterious commodity. It is something humble. It is hard to see and it cannot be measured easily.

Interestingly, Jesus tells us that only a small amount of faith is needed for great things to occur. The image of the tiny mustard seed which Christ employs underlines the littleness of faith – and, by extension, the humility to which it engages those who exercise it.

The point Jesus makes is that just a small amount of faith can make a really big difference.

I find this to be a particularly consoling thought.

Does it not flag up for us that people can be exercising faith even when they fail to recognise this to be the case?

Many people who live lives of deep faith are unaware of the remarkable testimony they bear to Christ by their simple way of being. We recognise them as truly Christian because they do small things extraordinarily well and make an enormous difference, living whatever is asked of them in humility of heart.

Mary is the great exemplar of faith, hope and trust in the Lord. She has much to teach us in this respect. She believed in the word spoken to her. She had faith. She responded to God's call by saying simply: *I am the Lord's servant, His humble handmaid.*

Mary trusted in the promise made to her by her Lord and she was not disappointed in her hope.

What a great difference she made to the human story by her simple, humble, gently whispered *yes* to God!

At this time in our lives, may we be encouraged to step out in faith and give our *yes* to God anew.

As the Lord's servants, may we do whatever the Lord asks us to do.

The small thing the servants did at Cana when they simply filled the jars with water – and they did so, as good servants, filling the jars to the brim – led to a wondrous miracle, a marvellous display of God's abundant, gracious love.

May our humble service lead to great things being done by the power of God's grace at work within us as we do whatever He tells us.