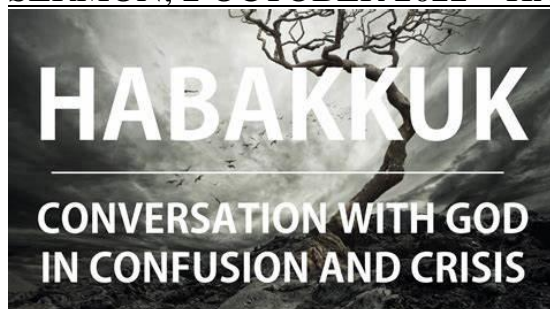


SERMON, 2 OCTOBER 2022 – HABAKKUK 1,2 – LUKE 17.5-10



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'll be honest with you, I went for Habakkuk this morning, mainly because we use the Old Testament at Evensong, and I haven't got the energy to write two sermons. He was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem round about 600 years before the birth of Christ, when the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, were threatening the Jewish people. We know nothing about him, but he is rare among the prophets in that he questions God – "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?"

The world doesn't change, and most of us watching the news over the last few days, ask "Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise." Strife and contention in this country – and we're not Russia, Ukraine, Iraq – or so many other countries in this world. For many of our fellow Christians, destruction and violence are an everyday part of life. I don't know how you keep your faith when that's the situation.



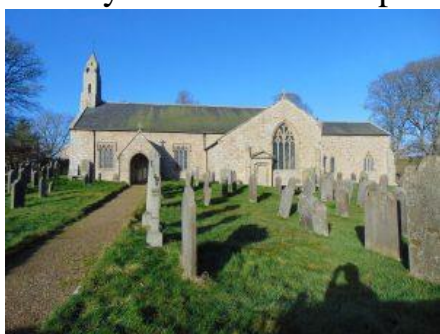
"So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous - therefore judgement comes forth perverted." The figures for legal delays, cases not taken forward, etc etc – law is not just being undermined across this world, but in this country too. We need the rule of law, we need safety and security, it costs money and needs resources. I did a police officers funeral last week, and the church was full of retired police officers all discussing how much better it was in their day – I did wonder how many of them have raised the cuts in police officer numbers with their MPs, but didn't feel it politic to ask!



I love the idea of standing at the watch-post, being stationed on the rampart. I go back to Hadrian's Wall, and imagine the prophet like a Roman sentry looking out north of the Wall, keeping a watch out. I have on a few occasions gone for a walk by Sewingshields Crag, and after dark it is, literally, an eye-opening experience. We have managed to keep Dark Skies in that part of the world, and the road runs south of the Wall – so you can look north, into the real dark. You can imagine what it must have been like, in the years when the border was fragile, the sentry spending his nights looking north, into the dark, wondering whether the movement was an animal, the wind, or a band of Picts.



North of the wall, about a day's march north of the wall, you can visit the Roman fort at Bremenium. You won't find an English Heritage ticket room, or a café, I don't suppose you'll see anyone else. Great thick walls, you can literally stand on the ramparts.



In the local parish church at Elsdon is a Roman tombstone found NE of the fort – photos on the printed version of the sermon on the website. It was erected to a commanding officer Rufinus by his wife Lucilla, the daughter of a senator.



On one occasion, dad and I walked the mile from the fort to the place where Rufinus was buried – a circular grave beside the road north into Scotland. I made some flippant comment about I bet the reason he was posted here was because his colleagues on the wall wanted to get rid of him. My dad, Roman scholar that he was, pointed out that Rufinus must have been quite some commanding officer if he was trusted with an outpost fort, a day's march north of the Wall. It was his job, not just to keep a watch north, because of course his enemy could come from north, south, east or west – he was literally in the middle of enemy territory, and he was the eyes and ears for the Roman frontier. You can imagine that when a message was sent south by Rufinus, his colleagues on the Wall took notice.



We've looked at the Vindolanda Writing Tablets before – making plain on tablets what was needed, what was going on. The one that amuses me was written by a soldier to his mum thanking her for the socks and underpants – it is the only evidence we have from anywhere in the Roman Empire of what Roman soldiers wore under their tunic! I don't suppose these tablets were very different from those that Habakkuk wrote.



St Mary's in Ponteland had a beautiful tower with very thick walls and very small windows. Often I asked the kids from the local school to work out why the walls were thick and the windows small. We worked out together it was a good place to take refuge, a place that would be safe when you could bar the door. I asked one class to tell me who they were hiding from, "the Nazis" came back the answer. You did wonder whether, on any of the regular border raids, men, women and children had been attacked or even lost their lives in or around the church – a place of security is also a place of fear. For many people they go together.

I'll be honest with you, security and fear are meshed together for me at the moment. I'm looking forward to a hospital appointment on Tuesday morning because I want the medics to tell me what is going on, and what the plan is – I'm not looking forward to it because I'm a bit frightened. They've had a good look – and I wonder what Habakkuk would make of a CT scan which can look inside you - and now the watchmen (or women) need to speak. And when they've spoken, then we move forward. I don't want a vision that looks to the end, I'm trying to be a righteous person who lives by his faith – and I appreciate your prayers as I try and do so.



As we move into October, with Harvest at St Edmund's this morning, I am taken back to the harvests of my teenage years. Working with Mr and Mrs Page, their son John and his wife Lena, Charlie and the other farm workers – working with them to get the harvest in. I'm not sure I was much use, but I could help lift bales, I could run and get what was needed, and I even grew up enough to be allowed to drive a tractor. I learned the skill of driving my tractor and trailer at the right speed so the combine harvester could discharge into my trailer – even if someone else had to drive the tractor to the grain store because I hadn't got a licence to drive on the road. Long days, hard work – and a sense of achievement.

And we celebrated in two ways. A big Harvest Supper to which everyone and their families were invited. We had worked, we were rewarded and thanked – how much better this world would be if every employer did that. And a week or two later, the Page family were the pillars of Barton Baptist Church, and we were all expected to be at Harvest Festival. I remember on one occasion walking in with them carrying the first fruits of the harvest, the sheaf of corn

that Mr Page had cut with his scythe before the combine harvester moved in. We said thank you to God.



I remember too that Mr Page, being a pillar of the Baptist Church, was one of the few farmers who would not harvest on a Sunday. On the first day of the week his combine, his tractors, were silent. I remember one year we had almost finished harvest on the Saturday evening, and anyone else would have done a couple of hours work on the Sunday to finish it off. Not Mr Page, and when the heavens opened Sunday afternoon, and the crop was damaged, he took it in his stride. It wasn't God punishing him, it was one of those things – and God would provide.

I don't know if the family still live in the fifteenth century farmhouse, and whether the fields are still farmed in the way they were. I can't phone mum and dad up and ask them, and anyway I'm not sure I want to turn the clock back 45 years and go and see. Harvest Festival is not an opportunity to turn the clock back – it is an opportunity to celebrate all that God has given, in the past and the present, and to commit ourselves to using his resources in the service of his people.



Indeed every eucharist is an opportunity to celebrate all that God has given, in the past and the present, and to commit ourselves to using his resources in the service of his people. The prophet speaks to his people, and his words speak to us – work with God to build a better world, to build his kingdom. Fight against the evil, stand up for what is right, and keep on fighting, protesting, giving, caring, loving, praying – worshipping. Because all these things matter.

Peter Barham
1 October 2022