

Sermon 3 November 2013  
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Luke 19:1-10 'The Strength of Our Witness'

Prayer: We pray for the understanding to live as your witnesses; and so Lord, as the One who keeps his promises, inspires and sustains the faithful, **we ask** you visit *again* with us. For you, Lord, are our Mercy; you give us strength; you Lord are our Righteousness, you give us wisdom; you Lord are our Promise, and give us hope. Amen.

A parable to begin our reflections today: (Stories and Parables for Preachers and Teachers. P22 Paul T Wharton)

After Jesus returned to Heaven, he and the archangel Gabriel were talking. Even in heaven Jesus bore the marks of the crucifixion. Gabriel said, "Master you must have suffered horribly! Do people know and appreciate how much you love them and what you did for them?"

Jesus replied, Oh no; not yet. Right now only a few people in Palestine know."

Gabriel was perplexed: "Then what have you done to let everyone know about your love?"

Jesus answered: "I have asked Peter, Andrew, James, John and a few more friends to tell others about me. Those who are told will tell others and yet others still others until the last man, woman and child in the farthest corner of the earth will have heard the story of how I gave my life for them because I love them so much."

Gabriel frowned and looked sceptical. "Yes, but what if Peter and the others grow tired? What if the people who come after them forget? Surely you have made other plans?"

Jesus said: "Gabriel – **I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them.**" Cv

Jesus began with only a 'few' people to give witnesses to his love. He was counting on them, is still counting on a 'few' people to give witness – **you and I included**. The question before us today is: 'What is the strength of our witness?' cV

I think it is fortunate that for us today this question is framed by the Habakkuk and Lucan scriptures, because even within these scriptures the challenge to us is formidable. Pope Francis said it this way in a recent interview with America Magazine: "The ministers of the gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost." (Mr Iain Johnston, an elder in Colston Milton Church, Glasgow, Sermon Starters Church of Scotland)

I wonder today for us, *here and now*, if the emphasis is on the '**without getting lost**', Jesus is counting on us to witness to him, without ourselves getting lost in / lost by the crowd. To be strong enough to climb walls / climb a tree to watch for what God is doing. To be strong enough to climb **down and witness** to what we have seen – and live the message. *Can we do it, with strength?*

One of the ways we draw strength is to absorb truths from our faith past. What Habakkuk saw has a few parallels with today's world! In the first part of our passage he cries out in despair to God for justice. There is a very real sense of frustration even anger at the corruption, the abuse, violence and lack of justice for his people. He challenges God with the sense of God's absence, remoteness, lack of response to saving his people.... *Does this not resonate* within us too? cV

What the text leads us to is a realisation on the prophet's part that as he works on these issues **he himself** must wait patiently for God's response. He knows that God is faithful and his justice will, in time, prevail. Iain Johnston, an elder in Colston Milton Church, Glasgow, Sermon Starters Church of Scotland) writes: "We can picture someone, having given vent to his frustration, in a subsequent state of relative calm. He roots himself. He listens. He waits. When God's response comes, the prophet is

reminded that there is hope for the future, even if it seems distant. The attitude of those who live by faith and who trust in God stands in stark contrast with those whose greed and pride leads them to depend on the transience of wealth.” cV

I can't help but see here, Jesus parable that *only Luke* tells us about, Zacchaeus, the “chief Tax Collector”. Zacchaeus is lost in his greed, pride and dependence on transient wealth, who in having Jesus ‘find him’ up a tree watching and waiting to see what God was doing, turned his life around to live by faith and trust in God.

Zacchaeus, which means ‘clean or innocent’ by the way! ‘Innocent’ Zac was looking to see what Jesus was doing. And as ‘he’ was short, Zac had to climb a tree to see Jesus. Who was short? Zac or Jesus? The text doesn't actually say! We just assume it was Zacchaeus. *Irrespective*, we know what it is to ‘hear’ about good things happening and want to see for ourselves the origin / the instigator / and make our own minds up. Just as much as we know that there is much darkness around and our people need us to bear witness to the light, to the hope, to a God who brings good news, even if it is in God's appointed timing.

There is an unmistakable, personal responsibility challenge being issued through the scriptures today, *just as much* as there is for us to share what we have seen, heard, understand God to be doing with our neighbour – with our community. And share it in ways so that they can easily understand, easily read it. Habakkuk had to make it short and sweet so a runner, ‘a herald’ could read as they were running past. We might want to re-frame that in our world, saying we have to have a 3 word sentence for a car driver to read while driving! Short, sweet to the point – what you see God is at work, doing.

How Zacchaeus did it was to hand money over in a way that restored justice, hope, and returned his life to living all of it in God's ways. Innocent Zac – was in fact anything but innocent when it came to greed and making money. As a chief tax collector he was chief collaborator, colluding with the hated Roman oppressors... as far as sinners go – he was ‘bad’. *Yet from the parable* and the condemnation given, it was all because of his ‘job’ and exercise / abuse of power through that. He is not condemned for breaking the food purity laws or for entering unclean areas etc. He knows all the rules, because he knows what the lawful restitution is spontaneously! He was living as a Son of Abraham, just not recognised, welcomed or accepted by the rest of the family, therefore ‘lost’, until Jesus came along!

There is a people valuation challenge in here again, (Loader). Do we accept, welcome and express our love to people because they keep the rules / the laws / outwardly show the same values that we do? This is the line / the expectation the critics of Zac have. **Or** do we begin where Jesus did? **We are valuable because we are loved, not loved** because we have *value*. Among his people Jesus would write no one off. (W Loader) When this core value of Jesus, came to be shared among the Gentiles, it was apparent, they too were included in the love of Jesus for all people. Loader says: “At one level, therefore, the story is another celebration of Jesus’ radical application of God’s love. God keeps an open table. Jesus expresses this by challenging Zacchaeus’ hospitality.”

Jesus said to Zac – ***I must*** come to your house today, and Zacchaeus found love, acceptance and saw the face of grace in person. The strength of Jesus witness in allowing Zacchaeus to be ‘found’, allowed Zacchaeus to find his real, God centred-self, he was no longer lost. Remember the parable concludes: “**9** Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Zac had been lost, but was now found and given his rightful place at the ‘family’ table. His personal transformation, this inner change of attitude lead him to outward change in acts of generosity which still make an impact on others leading to further transformation. It only takes one person to climb a wall, watch to see what God is doing, become a witness of that work – **in themselves and for others**. What is the strength of our witness, folks? Jesus is counting on us. Amen.