



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 5th October 2025

Readings: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Pentecost 17

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The righteous live by their faith (Habakkuk 2:4)

Members of the congregation will appreciate that I found it necessary to abandon what I had previously written on Thursday in the light of the events in Manchester that morning, which I discovered at the point I had completed what I had first written. Since I agree with the Chief Rabbi, when he said that all of us in positions of leadership need to watch our words very carefully, I am also keenly aware that, since it became a matter of routine to livestream our Sunday services, that places a particular responsibility on all who lead worship, not least on those who preach.

I guess that for most of us the prophet Habakkuk is not one of the regular books that we read; indeed, with only three chapters it is not even easy to find in our Bibles. And to know that it comes between Nahum and Zephaniah does not necessarily make it that much easier. Nevertheless, even after I felt it necessary to rewrite what I had written, I thought it still made sense to stick to the text I had originally chosen.

For two people to be murdered on their way to worship God on a Holy Day, for them the holiest day of the Jewish year is horrifying, not least because it brings the horrors that some people in other parts of the world experience daily into the reality of our normally peaceful domestic lives in an inescapable way. Cambridge is a long way from Manchester, particularly by train, but we have our own extremists too. There were times in eighteenth-century Cambridge when Dissenting Meeting Houses (of which the Great Meeting latterly further along Downing Place, predecessor of Emmanuel was one and St Andrew's Street Baptist Church another) were mobbed or attacked, usually by university students. What is alarming today is that such incidents demonstrate that what happens in one part of the world can have consequences hundreds and thousands of miles away almost immediately. I remember my father saying to me many years ago - I think it was probably at the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956 - that he believed that as long as the problem of Palestine remained unsolved there would never be peace in the world - and nothing has happened since then to make me think that he was wrong.

Habakkuk presents us with a complaint by the Prophet in chapter 1 and a response from God in chapter 2. They are the only verses from Habakkuk in the three-year Revised Common Lectionary. The Prophet complains that God does not seem to be responding to the popular complaints about unrestricted violence. God responds that the proud do not have a right spirit within them, but nevertheless the righteous live by faith. There is a sense in which Christians are not helped by the fact that Paul in his letter to the Church in Rome uses sayings like that in Habakkuk to argue a rather different point, namely that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. Because of the human tendency to sin, in so far as we are forgiven, it is always through the grace of God, not our good deeds.

If the Chief Rabbi's words are to be taken seriously, it is politicians as much as faith leaders who need to engage in some self-examination. The underlying problem about the current situation in Gaza is that the only people who are in any position to bring about change are the Israeli government, and we, unlike President Trump, are utterly powerless to change that. The result is extreme frustration on all sides. Protest marchers will achieve nothing. Passing resolutions will achieve less. The most it does is to make us feel better inside. In other words, although we justify such action to ourselves as standing up for justice, it all too quickly turns into a form of self-indulgence; I think that Habakkuk might call it pride. In any case, it is a sound principle that any criticism should begin with self-criticism.

In this respect I am not encouraged by the fact that right-wing politicians in almost every country with which I am familiar today seem to resent the way in which historians believe that children and young people should be made aware of the faults of those in authority. I was brought up to believe that it was one of the responsibilities of political leadership to make people aware of the truth. So I was always suspicious of anyone who tried to argue that it was dangerous for the public to know what the facts are,

which includes being honest about the extent to which we can be certain about what we are told. This means that we always have to be cautious about alleged versions of the truth which happen to suit the interests of those who proclaim them. For professional historians, it is almost part of their stock in trade to be sceptical of received versions of any previous history.

By the late 19th century when Zionism emerged as a political movement, it had been centuries since Jews had had any significant say in how the colonial state of which they were a part was governed. There had been some Jewish families who had lived in the country for centuries, but only a relatively small minority. After the Roman Empire in the East collapsed, the Middle East fell under Turkish control with the Ottoman Empire. From the time of Napoleon's invasion at the beginning of the 19th century, France and Britain had fought to gain maximum influence. It was European anti-semitism, ultimately based on Christianity rather than Islam, that made Zionism seem a plausible option; and it seems to have been what Lloyd George learned in his Churches of Christ Sunday School class that led him to espouse what was ultimately known as the Balfour Declaration of 1917, because Balfour was Lloyd George's Foreign Secretary in his Coalition Government during the First World War. But what the UK promised to different partners in the Middle East (which involved making incompatible promises to Jews and Arabs) led to an impossible political situation after 1945. From 1917 what had been promised was a Jewish state which preserved the rights of Palestinians - one reason why Israel was not originally envisaged as an exclusively Jewish state. This was accepted in the new, secular Israel of 1948; but Likud, the party Mr Netanyahu leads, has steadily moved to reject it. This illustrates, and possibly explains, the complex nature of the issues to be resolved. But it also makes clear the total lack of justification for the deaths in Manchester last Thursday. What they have also made clear is the relative lack of police powers to limit what we take as basic individual freedoms, so that inevitably pushes the responsibility for maintaining our understanding of civilised social behaviour on us as individual citizens. As Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'If' of 1910 put it, 'If you can keep your head/when all around you are losing theirs/and blaming it on you ... yours is the earth and everything that's in it.'

As a result of our relatively open media today, especially with the spread of its various electronic forms which have significantly increased the access routes for those wishing to spread their views online, we face challenges not faced by earlier generations, meaning changes in old ways of thinking, all of them. I do not have time to explore this in more detail this morning, but I would mention by way of illustration: How can any single nation justify an exclusive right to pursue its own national interest regardless of others? How do we need to look at the rights of the individual as against those of the wider community? As the Home Secretary remarked on Friday morning, the fact that we have a particular freedom does not mean that we do not need to consider others in the way we exercise it. What do we understand by the common good, if we still believe in it? How widely do we define community? (I attended a focus group discussion in the Guildhall last week about Local Government Reorganisation, where about fifty people turned up out of the total population of Cambridgeshire! It seemed that some interesting things were said, but how the significance of the views of such a small proportion of the thousands eligible to attend is to be assessed at the next stage is not self-evident.). What do we really mean by 'free speech' today?

Some ten days ago I went on the tour of the Cambridge Central Mosque organised by the inter-faith group of which this church is part. I did not learn anything new, but that was not why I went. I was there to experience Muslim worship and see how Muslim architecture is designed to evoke Islamic theology. I had experienced what Christians had made of Muslim worship space when we visited the formerly Islamic parts of Spain (Andalucia) some years ago, but that is not the same. It certainly highlighted similarities and differences, just as my few visits to the Middle East and Africa have enabled me to picture what otherwise I have only read about. I cherish these experiences which began in a simple way, when I was taken to services in our Anglican parish church as a child to see something different, which my father had come to value during his time in the Army in the War.

Growing up as a boy after the Second World War I cannot remember a time when it was not obvious to me that the future was inevitably international, not simply imperial. Two of the ministers of my home church came from overseas and two others had been missionaries in India or Africa. By comparison the ministry I have experienced in Cambridge has been almost parochial (in the bad sense of that term). This is why from time to time I have remarked in preaching, (usually without

explanation) that I regard individualism and nationalism as the great dangers of our age. Hence I reject Christian nationalism of the kind that seems to be flourishing in Trump's America as a contradiction in terms, and I regard the spreading of flag-flying with suspicion. And I do so because it does not seem to me to accord with what I find in Scripture.

Perhaps the most important piece of self-discipline we can take from this week's events is to make every effort to avoid speaking about people simply as part of a category (Jew, Christian, Muslim, immigrant, disabled etc.) and to remember that Scripture teaches that all people were created in the image of God. That is ultimately why murder is a sin, and a crime 'The righteous live by their faith' even when - perhaps particularly when - the going is tough. May it be so.

DMT, 5th October 2025