

# Faith is a way of life, not a commodity

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 October, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 17 C

**Habakkuk 1:1-6; 2:1-4; Luke 17:5-10**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYVTPrVt-d4>

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From the Bible, voices speak out to us from the distant past. One of them is from the Hebrew Bible, the only Bible that Jesus knew. What we call the 'Old' testament shaped his community and shaped his own understandings of God and the purposes of life.

Habakkuk wrote about events 600 years before the time of Jesus.

Jerusalem was about to be invaded by foreigners—and Habakkuk sees violence and strife in society; law is “*slack*,” and justice “*never prevails*.” He sees the overwhelming power of the enemy, an enemy that has made military power their God.

At first the prophet sees the invading Babylonians (from what is now Iraq) as a scourge from Yahweh--punishing the Jewish tyrant, King Jehoiakim. He welcomes the vision. But then there's a shift, and the prophet sees that Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian is also a tyrant.

The prophet is in despair, and rebukes God: “*Why do you look on faithless people,*” he prays. “*Why are you silent while the evil swallow up those who do justice?*”

It is a question God's people are always asking. Some of God's people, at least, asked it several centuries ago when others of God's people took four million Africans into slavery.

We have asked about God's silence while millions of Yahweh's Chosen People, along with Poles, Slavs, gypsies, and gay people, were taken into concentration camps and many murdered in the 1940's.

We wonder about God's silence when women, men and children seeking asylum are condemned to an ongoing soul-destroying hell in the limbo of Manus, Nauru and now, once again, on Christmas Island, where a mother and father and two little girls are held hostage to cruelty and indifference.

With the prophet, the oppressed shout “*Violence!*” at the heavens, and God does not save them. “*Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise.*” “*How long shall I cry for help, O God, and you will not hear?*”

Martin Luther King Jnr surely asked this of God each day of his struggle for racial justice. Indigenous Australians faced with a refusal even to acknowledge their right to a voice in their own country surely ask it. As do LGBTIQ people whose stress levels are rising as our lives are once again the playing field for political point scoring by churches and conservative politicians while a law that would enshrine the right to be hateful under the guise of religious freedom is debated.

The oppressed cry with the prophet, "What shall I do?" That question of the ancient prophet is as relevant today as it ever was.

But do we also hear Habakkuk as he says, "*I will take my stand to see if God answers my complaint.*"

Habakkuk said that God did speak to him, saying, "*Write the vision, write down what you see: so that the messenger himself can read it as he runs. If God's answer seems slow, wait for it, for it will surely come, it will not delay...when it comes there will be no time to linger...*"

It is only by being faithful people, not by "having faith" or "believing in things". Not by having faith as a possession, but by living a lifestyle, a Way of faithfulness that is part of our whole lifestyle, so that we may join the ones with whom God is in solidarity.

The Biblical commentators say that this discussion of "faith" in Habakkuk is the first place in the Bible where the ways of God are questioned, where someone dares to ask God, "*Why do the good suffer and evil people have it easy?*"

The answer of Habakkuk, still writ large enough for us to read, is "*the Vision waits its time*" – it is hurrying on its way, *'though it seems slow to reach you.'* Wait for it, it will not be side-tracked. And in the meantime, the people of justice shall live the life of faithfulness.

And in the 'New' Testament. The apostles came to Jesus asking for 'faith'. Luke seems to be suggesting that they thought of faith in quantitative terms, as a commodity, rather than as a way of life.

The wars our nation has engaged in, quietly and yet relentlessly, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been presented as necessary to defend our 'way of life.' The ongoing cruelty toward refugees; the remote killing, without trial or conviction, of people in far off places, are also justified in terms of protecting of our way of life.

When they invoke this, I don't think political leaders, are thinking of the way of life of Jesus. Maybe they are thinking of the neoliberal project of the affluent life of consumer society, individual freedom and environmental destruction, which the West has succeeded in helping itself to at the expense of the earth and its peoples.

The disciples apparently thought faith could be had by the kilogram. "*Increase our faith*" they asked. "*Give us more of it.*" We don't know the occasion for the request, because Luke inserts it in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man and, after the teaching about forgiving those who offend us as many times as they offend.

It doesn't seem to be connected to those readings. Perhaps the apostles simply got up one morning and said "*O God, I wish I had more faith. Give me more of whatever it takes to get through this day. More faith, dear God.*"

And Jesus' response to them is ironic. He comments, "*More faith? You're not using the faith you've got now! If the faith you had now were as big as a mustard seed, you could put it to work planting mulberry trees!*" More faith? You haven't yet put to work the faith that is yours, for faith is a Way! A way by which life and work are done, it's not a warehouse of expendable resources. Faith is not a fossil fuel to be mined and marketed.

It is a way of seeing. It is a way of being.

And that is why Jesus then immediately changes the subject from faith as quantity to faith as quality. He tells the story of the unworthy field hand – a slave in many translations.

I am uncomfortable about the Bible's metaphor of the master-slave relationship to model our relationship to God. But I know that Jesus used images drawn from the lived reality of first century Palestine. Chattel slavery was as universal in his time as wage slavery and bonded servitude are in our time. Jesus talked about and used the life of those around him to talk about the Reign of God and its eternal truths. He is not endorsing inequality, oppression and abuse in this story.

Jesus asks, "*Does anyone in the domination system thank the servant because the servant does what servants are for? When you've finished all your work in this domination system, you are still good-for-nothing. You only did your job.*"

A rather harsh and dreadful God, if we're talking about God. But we're not. Jesus is not.

We're talking about a lifestyle of faith, faith as a way to do our work, as committed to Liberation as we were once committed to Domination.

Faith not done for prizes, but faith acted out for the joy of it, knowing whom it is that we serve, with whom we are in right relation. To make faith quantitative is to make it a parable of our wealth before the world, something that needs legal protection from the queers and the atheists.

So, here we have two witnesses speaking to us from so long ago: two prophets, Habakkuk and Jesus; speaking of Faith. Habakkuk says we can read the billboard on the M4 as we drive by. The billboard that says: "*Hang in there. Help is on the way.*" The oppressed will be liberated.

And Jesus, who says, Faith is the Life we are called to as Friends of God, not as slaves. Faith is not a commodity, but a community. We are not called to be keepers of a sacred flame. We are called to be inflammatory agents of disruption. Even in our times of downheartedness about the world and the church, we are called to set the place on fire and to live out the new vision that is given to us all.

As we encounter Christ, risen and present with us in Christa/Community, in Holy Communion.

As we celebrate the liberating promises enacted in the baptism of a little child.

As we are repeatedly touched by divine grace, we are progressively shaped into Christ's image.

To be Christ's people.

All of this work is not done in a moment. It is, instead, a lifelong process through which God intends to shape us into people motivated by love and kindness, empowered and impassioned to do Christ's work of love and justice, in this world.