

Trinity 18 – Holding Fast to the Gospel
All Saints, Coddington, 3rd October 2010

Well you can't help but sympathise with the prophet Habakkuk in our first reading, can you? The world is going to the dogs anybody can see that! I remember my mother and her next door neighbour used to spend hours talking to each other out of their back doors, as my mother said, "setting the world to rights" and the conversation would usually end with one or the other saying, "Well I don't know what the world is coming to", after which they would both go into their houses happy.

But there is plenty that *is* wrong with the world. We have the example of the Irish government having to bail out its banking system because the bankers have lent money to build properties nobody wants, making themselves a profit in the process and leaving the taxpayer to foot the loss and putting people out of work. It's the result of a system oriented towards short-term gains, or in other words greed. And of course our banking system suffers from the same problems with the same results. Well, there's plenty wrong with the world, so why doesn't God do something about it?

But first of all we ought to ask ourselves what does God really think about our goings-on? It is always a good idea to ask ourselves what would Jesus say about the current situation? He might actually have been quite relaxed about it, recognising that money is simply symbolic – it's the relationships between people which matter, not the bits in computer memories which is what most money is these days. It is very easy to attribute our prejudices to God, thinking that God looks at the world like we do, and thereby breaking the third commandment. I think that is what we can learn from the Old Testament when we see laws stoning adulterers to death and incidents where people in conquered cities were put to the sword, all in the name of God.

In the present day I would also put the divisions we have in the church into the same category of things that Jesus does not really care about. I cannot think that women as leaders, or homosexuality, would have seemed as great an issue to Jesus as it does to those who are preparing to split the church today on these issues. But then I have got to be careful not to break the third commandment myself and attribute to Jesus my own opinions. What do we do to avoid this? The only thing I can say is that we must always compare our lives with the life of Christ and His teaching. And then perhaps not get too worked up about the issues that trouble us. It helps to have an eternal point of view on these things.

And there is plenty in the world that we can be happy about. The last 50 years have seen a tremendous improvement in people's standard of living and in their state of health, not only in this country but also worldwide. The great famine of India in the 1870s under British rule resulted in 5 million deaths. Think of it! This simply would not happen these days and we have seen a tremendous improvement in food supply as a result of the Green Revolution, so famines are much less widespread. Worldwide people are living longer, health care is better and education is more widely available. But this progress has been achieved because people have worked for it, and also worked for free and just societies where the poor and vulnerable are protected.

So I think it is wrong to say that the world is going to the dogs, but on the other hand there is certainly much that needs to be done to maintain progress, particularly in the face of all the threats that confront us. Now it is easy to think that this is a job for the politicians but there is a limit to what legislation can achieve and in any case politicians can only work within the consensus of society as a whole. A fair and just

society is achieved by people – people like us, who are motivated by more than self-interest. Christians should be beacons in this society, challenging the idea that it is everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost. And we should examine ourselves to make sure that this is so in our own lives. It is not enough to do no harm. If Christianity is to mean anything it should alter our behaviour in a way which is noticeable by other people.

How are we to do that? Well, I will give you three exhortations and the first is to be aware of the world: to be aware of all the issues; to be aware of different peoples views of the world; to be aware of all the problems. Christians often do not look outside their churches, but the church is not a social club nor is it a preservation Society but it is there to change the world. It should show that we are aware of the problems in the world and that we are prepared to do something about it. So let's have a look at this building. What message does it convey to the visitors who come to it? What does it say about what we are doing? This is a lovely church but I feel it doesn't challenge us enough nor explain what our priorities are.

The second exhortation I would like to give you is to be Christ-like. This sounds like a tall order and indeed it is, but we can at least try to follow his example. If you read the Gospels you get quite an impression of Jesus firstly as someone who cared for people. He looked people in the eye and understood their cares and concerns. Jesus was quite capable of expressing himself forcefully, but nevertheless did not force his views down other people's throats. You know that expression that occurs frequently in the Gospels "he that hath ears to hear let him hear". And of course Jesus knew and understood his mission on earth and lived it out. What we must do is to bear witness to that fact, and make it central to our own lives.

The third exhortation I want to give you is to be involved. The people in the church should be the ones doing things, making the village tick and the world go round. It does no good complaining about the Council or the government apart possibly from relieving your feelings, but you don't change things that way. You must join in and get your hands dirty. It takes time and effort and is often very boring, but it is worthwhile and brings its own rewards. Interacting with people and doing things together is rewarding in its own right.

Be aware; be Christ-like; be involved: there is no denying that it is challenging as well as hard work and like Habakkuk we need a vision to keep us going. But I don't think a vision of a perfect society will actually do because it is so difficult to envisage one. I must say I do not find the descriptions of heaven in the book of Revelation altogether convincing or even attractive. But the vision we can have is the same vision that sustained Paul, the vision of the good news of Christ: there are such things as good and evil in the world, and the good will overcome the evil. As he says in our second reading:

For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

May God give us this faith in our daily lives.