

Ordinations Ghent 2021 Habakkuk

It is a pleasure and joy to be ordaining Sarah-Jane, Annie, Dorienke and Matt this morning. I am enormously grateful to all the diocesan staff who have worked hard in the discernment, training and administration that has led up to today. I express thanks on behalf of us all to Stephen Murray and the people of St. John's Ghent for your gracious welcome and meticulous organisation, to Sam Van Leer who conducted yesterday's retreat, and to John Wilkinson, David Mitchell and Jonathan Halliday from Holy Trinity for support with our liturgy and for today's beautiful music.

The prophet Habakkuk says: 'I will stand at my watchpost, I will keep watch to see what he will say to me.' There are many aspects to the ordained ministry. One of them, and it is for Anglicans the first mark of mission, is to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. As the liturgy of ordination puts it: 'deacons are called to work with the Bishop and the priests with whom they serve as heralds of Christ's kingdom. They are to proclaim the gospel in word and in deed.' Every time a new minister is licenced in the Church of England the preface to the declaration of assent is read which commits us to proclaiming the faith afresh in each generation. One of the things the church looks to from its ordained leadership is the ability to interpret the signs of the times and to speak with authority and relevance into the conditions of our age.

This is a demanding task. How do we connect an ancient faith with the contemporary world? Yet God is the eternal now, and we believe that as God has spoken to his people in the past, so he speaks to us now, and in the ancient scriptures we find truths which provide inspiration and direction for life today.

I want in a few minutes this morning to share with you something of what this might mean for us, and what I think God might be saying to us in our current very difficult conditions.

We are living in times unlike those any of us have experienced before with the conditions of the Covid-19 epidemic. For a recent six days I have been attending an online conference of the World Council of Churches. And one thing that brought home to me forcefully is that wherever you are on the planet Covid-19 is the big issue: it is truly a global pandemic. But Covid is not just an illness. It is also a revelation. Because a crisis allows us to see what was not previously evident, even though it was always before our eyes. Covid has, I think, revealed to us afresh some very old truths about the fallenness of the human condition and made the salvation offered in Jesus Christ even more urgent and important.

The Bible sets out for us a story of salvation. It has been described as a drama in five acts. Creation, the fall, the election of Israel, the coming of the Godman Jesus Christ, and the era of the church with hints of how it will all end. To proclaim the fourth and fifth acts, you have to get the second act right. To know why humanity needs saving, you have to be clear what has gone wrong. The story of Adam, Eve and the serpent embodies themes which recur in human existence.

First of all, the story makes clear to us that humanity's fall is linked to twisted communication. The serpent, otherwise known as the father of lies, sows doubt in Eve's mind as to what the Lord had actually commanded. 'Did God really say that?' he asks. The actual taking of the forbidden fruit is linked to being like God – knowing good from evil.

The result of the fall is a dislocation between humanity and nature – paradise is lost. And there is a rupture in human relationships: first of all there is enmity between the man and the woman, soon afterwards there will be the first murder. Finally, humanity is reminded of its mortality: Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit from the tree which gives knowledge of good and evil, but the fruit of the tree of life is denied them. They will die.

The covid pandemic has faced us in a new way with our dislocation from nature. Viruses which are harmless to bats have jumped across a species barrier to humans where they are very harmful. We have been reminded of our human fragility and mortality. Huge numbers of people across the world have become seriously ill and very many have died. Wrapped up with all this have been striking instances of twisted communication. At first the illness was denied. Remember those prominent politicians who were proud not to wear masks. And along with the new vaccines came an industry of people seeking to sow doubt on social media about them – so that in some parts of the world and amongst some people groups there is great reluctance to be vaccinated. The virus has also laid bare a different kind of epidemic, that of loneliness – we have become alienated from one another. At worst there is violence between people notably a serious rise in domestic violence with men, mainly, attacking and sometimes killing women – even in civilised western Europe. And also an unmasking of serious inequalities leading to impacts which are much greater in some communities than others.

Habakkuk goes up his watchtower. He reflects on the appalling situation facing his country with widespread internal corruption and powerful external enemies. And he waits to see what the Lord will say. What does the gospel say to us?

In the first place, God comes among us in Jesus as the one who is full of grace and truth. Jesus is indeed the way, the life and the truth. The greatest spiritual antidote to the father of lies is to live in relationship with Jesus who is the truth. A life modelled on Jesus Christ will be one in which telling the truth, being completely honest will be of high priority. A survey in *Test-Achats*, the Belgian consumer magazine suggested that most Belgians believe that social media frequently gives them fake news, and if you've seen the very scary film 'Social Dilemma' you'll have a good sense of how serious the duping of entire people groups can be. The church which is founded on Jesus is to be a community where the sharing and telling of truth is taken extremely seriously.

Jesus Christ comes to us as truth, and he comes to us as healer. I have always been struck that about a quarter of the activity of Jesus in the gospels is related to healing miracles. In our time, the extraordinarily rapid invention of several different vaccines is the great healing miracle. If you have had your vaccines, I wonder where you received them: a sports hall, or amphitheatre perhaps? I like very much that in England cathedrals were available as vaccination venues. What better than to wait for your vaccine in a building dedicated to prayer whilst listening to beautiful organ music? A great reminder that science including biological sciences are part of the healing purposes of God.

Jesus came to a world in which people were divided from one another by race, gender and purity status. He paid particular attention to the dignity of women. He gathered around him a band of disciples which would become the radically inclusive community of the church.

This would be a society in which there would be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all one in Christ Jesus. Many times in its history the church has got things very wrong, but it yet remains as a possibility and a hope for overcoming the alienation between people which runs very deep in our nature.

But perhaps most significantly, the story of Jesus Christ is one of resurrection. It is not possible to read any of the four gospels without realising that the death and the resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of it all. Covid 19 has brought us face to face with human mortality. Many of us have been bereaved in complicated circumstances unable to attend funeral of those we have loved. But the good news of the gospel is that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. As Christians we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

People have often asked me during the crisis where I find hope. My hope is not in a gradual improvement in the situation and the eventual return of life to normal. My hope, what I believe to be Christian hope, is of a completely different order: it is for the transformation of the world and eternity with God. It is for the complete undoing of the effects of humanity's fall from grace and for paradise regained.

Amongst our large collection of kitchen mugs, we have one which says: 'Do not say to God, I have a big problem; say to your problem I have a big God.'

There is a class of problems that are sometimes described as 'wicked problems'. These are problems that are impossible to solve because of incomplete knowledge and the interconnectedness of multiple complex issues. I think Habakkuk faced this sort of problem in the context of the ancient near eastern politics of his time. And we can

also feel that the problems we face are so difficult we just want to run away and hide.

Habakkuk does not do this. He goes up onto his watchtower and he waits. And eventually an answer comes. God speaks to him.

To our ordinands, to all of us, I would want to say: now is not the time to run away and hide. Now is the time both to discern the voice of God and to speak the good news with confidence. We have a big God and the story of salvation is extraordinarily powerful. If the Bible is a drama then I encourage you to know the script and to stay faithful to it. Then to improvise in your contexts a story that will speak faithfully and relevantly.

And one final thought. The Covid crisis is not yet ended. But the vaccination programme gathers strength, and by September there is a good chance life will have many less restrictions. All of us will then need to find ways of re-animating and regathering our church communities. We have worked hard at online worship.

Online worship has enabled many to connect with our churches in difficult times. Online worship is good. But physical worship is better. Online worship gives sound and sight; but physical worship also gives touch and taste and smell. Christianity is an incarnational religion. Consider the gospel reading: Jesus asks Thomas to touch his flesh, almost embarrassingly physical.

Sarah-Jane, Annie, Dorienke and Matt: we are thankful today for the new life, leadership and energy you bring to our church. May you indeed be heralds of the kingdom, proclaiming the gospel in word and in deed. And may your ministry be a great source of personal fulfilment and a blessing to all those whom you serve.