

Words from our Old Testament Lesson from Habakkuk:

'How long, Lord, will you be deaf to my plea? 'Violence', I cry out to you, but you do not come to the rescue...

Law becomes ineffective, and justice is defeated;

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

What do you think of when you think of justice? I think of the statue on top of the Old Bailey in London. I can picture her in my mind's eye, as it were presiding, straight-backed and blind-folded, over the dealings of the city, nay, the world, scales in one hand and sword in the other. Remote, majestic. An immovable principle. They used to show the picture of that statue in reports of serious crimes on the evening news. Photography was not allowed in the court-room, so the reports were accompanied by sketches of the defendants, their soft, pastel tones strangely at odds with the wicked things they were accused of. I remember feeling scared by those reports on the news, but also the sense of comfort that came from the knowledge that wrongdoers were being put away. I used to think, 'I would hate to meet such a person'.

Crime and criminals are on my mind again in South Africa. Of late, we've have been having a lot of crime in the area around the College of the Transfiguration, where I teach. The College has been broken into twice since I arrived in August, and there have been several incidents in the streets, including an assault on a child, and several house break-ins. A neighbour the week before last was hit over the head with a brick by somebody trying to get her hand-bag. This was at nine o'clock on a Saturday morning.

The prophet's cry of 'violence' – uttered in the desperate heat of the moment, much as one would shout 'fire' – that cry, and the awareness of lawlessness all around, is new to me as a visitor here. I try not to dwell on it, to get on and live my life, but the reminders of safety issues are constant. Preparing for this sermon, I noticed for the first time, the subliminal message I get every time I leave my house from the burglar alarm (yes, I know I am lucky to have one). As I start to punch in my code, it tells me to 'secure system before arming'. There are several interesting things here. 'Secure system'. Well, we all wish to be secure; and to be watched over by a 'system' ought to be reassuring, more so than to have the protection of a mere device, or apparatus. And most significantly, this promise of 'arming' that is going to take place. Strictly speaking, to describe what my burglar alarm does as 'arming itself' is over-egging the pudding. But I know what message I am intended to derive from reading the screen. I never noticed it until the last couple of days, but it is a violent message.

A man I was chatting to in the Rat and Parrot recently was very concerned about crime. Like the Prophet, he felt that 'law becomes ineffective, and justice is defeated'. His friend, a lawyer, agreed, and gave us some interesting illustrations as to why the justice system seems not to be keeping up. The first man proposed his own solution, that of keeping arms by the door and using them whenever necessary, a sort of individual vigilantism.

This course of action doesn't appeal to me as a Christian and a coward, but another neighbour who was broken into recently did produce a shot-gun and careered down the street with it after his attackers. My colleagues heard the shots.

'We' cry 'violence', and we ask 'where is justice?'

But 'they' of course are crying too. In a city with 65% unemployment in a country with this history and this degree of inequality between rich and poor and this education system, others too are wondering where's the justice? Is it so hard to understand if there's some informal redistribution?

'The wicked hem in the righteous'. 'How long, Lord, will you be deaf to my plea?'

Justice is of course always a matter of personal concern. How we make sense of our communities, and our places of work, how we relate to those who provide us with services, these are all matters of justice. After much internal debate I have finally started employing a woman to clean for me and do my ironing. She comes twice a month. I worked out that if she works every day for the rate I pay her, she will earn in a month what I earn in a week. Where's the justice in that?

But questions of justice on the macro level trouble as almost as much as those on the micro-level. We seek justice not just for ourselves and our neighbours, but also for the communities that produce those we perceive as threatening us. Justice for the school-children, and for domestic workers. Justice for Jabob Zuma and for Julius Molema. For Iraq, for Libya, for Burma. Justice on this Remembrance Sunday for all those caught up in war, for all who cry, 'violence'.

Justice in all these many and varied situations: what would it look like? The age-old cry that issues in this evening Old Testament lesson from the lips of Habbakuk is made up in part of that perennial human sense of sadness and discontent with a world that is not as it should be; and in part of a very specific historical reality. Habakkuk's moment was the time around the beginning of the sixth century before Christ when the kingdom of Judah was looking on powerlessly at its own approaching doom. Solomon's kingdom had been divided upon his death some time around the middle of the tenth century, and the northern kingdom had prospered, more or less, for a couple of hundred years, falling late in the eighth century to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah, where Habakkuk was ministering, got off lightly by paying tribute, but succumbed to foreign influence, both Assyrian and Egyptian. The violence and abuse that Habakkuk speaks about in the opening verses of the Book are due to internal sin, not external threat. The following verses, however, turn our attention to the approaching Babylonians, the Chaldeans. Habakkuk is writing probably around the time of the Battle of Carchemish in 605, a decisive defeat of the Assyrians by Babylon, signaling the eclipse of the Assyrians as a major power in the region, and the rise of the Babylonians. 'Who's next?' was the question on everybody's lips in Judah. The writing was on the wall for Judah. Sure enough, in 587, the encroachment that Habakkuk foresaw, took place – a 'savage and impetuous nation [marching] far and wide over the earth to seize and occupy what was not theirs. Fear and terror going with them, their horses swifter than leopards, keener than the wolves of the plain'.

Habkkuk is trying to rationalize a complex situation. He opposes the cruelty and exploitation and faithlessness and luxury of the leaders of Judah, and recognizes the hand of Yahweh, the hand of the LORD, in the Babylonian threat. But how is it, he asks that God, to put down one evil, looks set to

inflict on the people a still greater one? How can it be just? Habakkuk speaks into the people's age of anxiety, an skepticism and fear. His fellow-prophet Zephaniah, declares, 'I shall search Jerusalem by lantern-light and punish all who are ruined by complacency like wine left on its lees, who say to themselves, 'The LORD will do nothing, neither good nor bad'.

Habakkuk's fear is not that the Lord will do nothing. Rather, he seems to see a procession of horrors coming towards him, each more soul-destroying than the last. In answer to his anguished cry, 'how long?', Yahweh responds, as one scholar notes, by '[disclosing] horizons of still greater sufferings and trials'.

And yet Habakkuk seems to experience his situation as far from hopeless. 'I shall stand at my post', he say, 'I shall take up my position on the watch-tower, keeping a look-out to learn what he says to me'.

How is it that, confronted with such discouragement as the certain conquest of his country by the rapacious Babylonians, replacing serious internal evils with external one that will be far worse – how is it that Habakkuk has this confidence that the Lord will speak?

His confidence I think springs from the conception of justice he has in mind. A justice not of principle and impersonality – the blindfold statue, up on high – but of relationship. The guarantee that God will speak is the character of God, a character declared and sealed in his covenant with his

people. 'Justice' in books like Habakkuk that take shape within the orbit of the theology of Deuteronomy, means something like 'covenant faithfulness'. It is anchored, not like our concepts of justice, in the efficiency and transparency of institutions, or in timeless and immovable principles, but in relationship to the one who is just. It maybe bears more resemblance to the ideal of village justice than to Western conceptions: The chief in counsel with the elders knows us as we are, our history, our family background, our strengths and weakness; he judges us in love, and is guided by the desire for our shalom, our well-being, and the shalom of the whole community.

Injustice will not go away, and we may not execute a pious retreat from social problems and the problems of institutions. And we do not retreat from them – look at the contribution Christians make to civil society and the cause of justice in our societies. But like Habakkuk we know that in terms of what's actually going to happen on the larger scale things may well go from bad to worse, and we may continue to be powerless to influence them.

Why then ascend this lonely watch-tower? For what are we going wait up there while the world goes to rack and ruin? Well, from there I suppose we see, a little more as God sees, the pattern to all the scuttling and scurrying, the crime and luxury, the deceit, the failure. It is from there that we shall start to sense the sense of interconnectedness that alone leads to shalom among humans, the well-being of human communities. It is from there that we will hear as of old the people heard amid thunder and cloud and trumpet blast, the voice that announces the peace of God's covenanted love, the peace of justice-in-relationship.

