

DO YOU NEED SAVING?

Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-5; Luke 19: 1-10

You are stuck in a situation that is wearing you down. Or you are caught in a situation with people who are making your life hard. Maybe they put you down. Sometimes they threaten you or someone you love. You are afraid. You are angry. You want to endure it. Maybe it will pass. But sometimes you feel hopeless. How long till it's over?

What situation am I talking about specifically? Any number of real life situations really. It may be a work place situation that is unbearable just now. It may be a child in an abusive home who cannot take it anymore. It may be people on the run from violence in hiding, or in some overpopulated and underserved refugee camp or detainment centre who cannot endure any longer. It may be a people under threat by another people or nation who are overwhelmed by fear or dread. It may be a caregiver who is burdened beyond the breaking point.

The people of Israel were in such a situation. The prophecy of Habakkuk addresses this situation from the perspective of those who are oppressed. But who are the oppressors? In our reading it is not clear whether the oppressors are foreign peoples who have dominated and subjugated Israel, or, whether the oppressors are the ruling class in Israelite society making life for ordinary people unbearable. Scholars are divided in their interpretation. But what is clear is that the prophet is waiting for a vision to be given to him, a word of hope for the people. He doesn't have the vision yet. He is waiting for it, desperately. He is praying. He is thinking. He is pleading... How long, O Lord!

He needs the strength and focus to endure this difficult time... He needs to trust in faith that the way forward will be opened up... He needs to believe hope for a new day will come.

Have you ever experienced this kind of thing? Not only a situation of difficulty but also the challenge of waiting... waiting for God, waiting for the way forward to open up? This is Habakkuk's situation. God is not just some word for him. God is not just some idea he thinks about when his mind wanders. No. God is his creator and God is his redeemer, and even though the world around him makes little sense right now, even though the world within him is confused and shaking, he

will keep praying so he can find inspiration to watch and wait and keep hope alive for a way forward to open up.

So, what about you and me? We're quite a long way away from the situation of Habakkuk. Just the same, though, we are all acquainted with difficulties of one form or another. What happens when we become overwhelmed by our lives? What happens when we face the lifelessness in our jobs, our marriages, our relationships? What happens when we admit to ourselves we are lonely, or unhappy, and we can't take it anymore? What happens when we realize that our restlessness or compulsive busyness is a cover for a gnawing ache in our soul about which we don't know what to do? What happens when our constant struggle to make ends meet or our constant worry for a loved one is eating away at us so that we question how long we can hold it together? What happens when we don't know what we want to do with our lives and nothing really compels or excites us about school or work? What happens when we feel our best days have gone and all that's left is the journey toward death? What happens indeed!

Habakkuk's message is: watch and wait, prayerfully. Don't give up calling on God. Keep an open mind and an open heart for forms of communication that may be coming to you. Do you need saving? It won't necessarily come in the form you want it. It may mean making some hard choices, some new commitments, some sacrifices, perhaps some confrontations or at least some serious conversations. God is not some source of power that resolves human problems just like that. God works through our working, our praying, our discerning, our struggling. God gives strength to our failing strength, inspiration when we are losing hope, clarity when confusion is getting the best of us, heart when our energy to love is failing fast, faith when our ability to trust is breaking up.

God is always there. God is always there to save us. But we may not want God there. We may not want to be saved. We may not like our situation, but the challenge to do something about it, something we don't want to do, may keep us stuck, blocked, shut down. We may moan and complain. We may just put up with it in quiet despair. But there is no way around the struggle. It is the struggle that will form our character. It is the struggle that will open up grace, peace, joy and wholeness in us. Toxins don't leave our bodies and spirits by some magic pill. It takes exercise of the spirit as much as exercise of the body. It takes concentration and commitment to follow a path to liberation, knowing that there will be pain in the process before freedom and fullness will come.

Well, this may all sound great in theory. But what does it look like in real life? Let's consider the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a tax collector. Let's put this into context. The Jews are under foreign occupation. The Romans own their land and run things. They allow the Jews to have some independence in Palestine but at a price. They have to pay heavy taxes. Taxes keep the Roman army and its massive administration well-funded. But how to collect these taxes efficiently? Get local Jews to collect them. Give them power to extract taxes. And how do tax collectors themselves get paid for doing Rome's dirty work? Collect extra taxes above the regular taxes which they can then keep as profit.

Well now, imagine the situation in Palestine at the time. Subjugated peoples are never going to be rich. Quite the opposite. They will be desperately poor except for the few elite who are in cahoots with Rome for the sake of running things. So where do tax collectors fit in? They too are well off, some of them exceedingly so. They collect enormous taxes for Rome and then they collect taxes on top of the taxes so that they can have their profits too. No wonder they were hated so much.

Now Zacchaeus, we're told, was rich. He obviously collected lots of taxes well beyond the cut he had to give to Rome which was already enormous. People were desperately poor and the little they had was taken from them to keep a whole administrative and military machinery in place that did little for them but kept them dominated. Where would all that frustration and rage focus itself? On people like tax collectors. You can imagine that Zacchaeus would have had armed body guards wherever he went, as well as soldiers who would go along with him when he went from house to house to collect taxes.

And now we come to our story. Jesus is passing through a town called Jericho. He is on his way to Jerusalem, to his final showdown with the authorities. On his way, though, he is gathering a crowd. In the crowd are various kinds of people. Some people are desperate. They have no work, nothing much to do. They have failed in life and they carry much grief and shame about it. Others are there to check Jesus out. They have been sent there by the authorities so that they receive regular reports. The plan is to engineer Jesus' downfall. As we know they are successful, although the big surprise is that where they believe they have succeeded, God will prove their failure. For Jesus is not into power but into love. Where Rome and the Jewish leadership have the power to crush Jesus, God who is love is able to resurrect life beyond the crushing.

The story of Zacchaeus is a foretaste of God's victory of love over the powerful forces of death that poison us all. As Jesus passes through Jericho teaching,

healing and calling people to join his kingdom of God movement, he notices Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus is fascinated by Jesus. He wants to see Jesus. He is a small man and there is a large crowd. He climbs a tree to get a look. And what does Jesus do? I would hate to be picked out in a crowd, especially a crowd like that. It's not a friendly crowd. Most everyone there hates Zacchaeus. But Jesus picks out Zacchaeus. He receives a lot of criticism for it. But he doesn't care. He recognizes that Zacchaeus needs saving. But even more. He recognizes that Zacchaeus is ripe for saving.

Zacchaeus has come face to face with the limits of his life. He wants a way out, He needs a way out. He doesn't know how. What secret ingredient will open up the pathway? Jesus' fellowship. Jesus' love. Zacchaeus is being summoned to join the kingdom of God movement, a movement powered by expansive love. But what does such love look like in concrete terms?

Jesus doesn't tell Zacchaeus what to do. He doesn't tell him to give away his money. He doesn't tell him he is an awful human being who should go down on his knees and repent or he'll burn in hell. No. Jesus just shows love to him, authentic, human-to-human love. Imagine how Zacchaeus must have felt. He knew what it was like to suffer hostile stares, the heat of hatred coming off the bodies of people around him whenever he went out in public. And so, his response to such honest love from Jesus is guttural, heart-felt, spontaneous: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Jesus receives such a response to his love as the response of salvation: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Zacchaeus has been unlocked from the trapped, vicious cycle that has been his life. He has been liberated. He has been saved. He is on a new path for his life.

Now, we may not be Zacchaeus. We may not be so deeply trapped in a situation we don't know how to get out of. But whoever you are, whoever I am, we are all vulnerable to feeling trapped in life, overwhelmed at times, lost in our way, questioning our path, our vocation, our relationships. We may have lost our energy for life, feeling oppressed by circumstances or by the pressure others put on us. Or we may have so much busy stress or responsibilities we can't afford to stop and ask ourselves whether change must come somehow.

But whoever we are Jesus is speaking to us in this story too. Jesus is summoning us to follow him, to open our hearts, to be liberated from the blocks, the traps, the

compulsions, the situations that wear us down. Some things cannot be changed, this is true. May God give us the grace to accept them and to live them with some serenity. But there is much that can be changed if we are given the courage, the light and the energy. May we respond like Zacchaeus, each of us, and may we be saved. Let us pray: O God, you know where we can get stuck in our lives... where we are stuck just now... You know where we can lose our faith, our hope, our love... You know how deeply we need more.... Build us up as we call on you... show us the way... Amen.