

How long must we cry?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The floods in Pakistan.

The hurricanes in North America.

Floods and landslides in the Philippines.

The floods in Australia.

We can look across the world and see tragedy after tragedy, horror after horror. Across the world there are more refugees now than at any point in history. There is war, there is persecution, there is exploitation. Closer to home we see the tragedies of suburban lives. Domestic violence, child abuse. Conflict and violence all over the place.

And we who are followers of Jesus so often despair. We know God didn't intend the world to be like this. We know that God sent Jesus into this world to save us. But we look around and despair. We may well shake our collective fists at God and say, "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Or cry out God, "Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?"

We might know in our hearts that God has a plan – a plan to put all things right, a plan to restore all things to the way they were meant to be – but so often, if we look at things objectively, it seems that that plan is just not happening.

Of course, we could go back through history, and find similar situations: the world wars, the Holocaust, Stalin, Pol Pot, the Armenian genocide, the Spanish flu, the great depression, all in the twentieth century, and back further and further: the Napoleonic wars, the black plague... and on and on.

And each time, the people of God despaired, "How long, Lord, must [we] call for help, but you do not listen?"

And way back in the time of the prophet Habakkuk, in the seventh century BC, the nation of Israel was foundering, the Babylonian empire was rising in power, destruction and violence and fighting and quarrelling were everywhere, the law was weak, the people were corrupt and the wicked surrounded the righteous.... so Habakkuk cried out: "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"

How long? Well 2,600 years and counting, it seems.

The book of Habakkuk is only short – three chapters, 56 verses in all, and it covers Habakkuk's complaints to God, God's responses, and concludes with an eighteen verse long prayer.

And while it might be a short book, it's still useful and relevant today. The complaints that Habakkuk had are the complaints that we have – mostly "Why God, aren't you doing anything about this situation?", and in fact the situations are the same too – violence, injustice, exploitation, faithful people being only a minority, and people turning away from God.

And just as we relate to Habakkuk's circumstances, and so we also relate to Habakkuk's complaint to God – the challenge of course, is for us to accept God's response.

The situations that Habakkuk encounters are not unique to him – we hear from other prophets in similar circumstances. Nahum, Jeremiah and Amos all had similar concerns to Habakkuk, but while Jeremiah and Amos were warning the people, Habakkuk by contrast engages with – and in fact argues with – God.

“How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?,” he asks in verse 2. This is clearly not Habakkuk’s first cry to God – he’s been doing it over and over again... how long? How long? Why? Why, oh why?

It’s easy to become very formal, very polite when we pray to God. “Dear Lord, please give me these things. Amen”, and of course in churches we love such formality, such tradition – and with good reason too, I should add. It is appropriate that we should have formalised prayers, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray... and Jesus gave them a template to pray with.

But sometimes, I think we should simply open our hearts to God. To pour out our hearts to God. If we’re despairing, then we can share that despair, if we’ve frustrated, then share that frustration, and if we’re angry, then share that anger, too.

It’s okay for prayer to be passionate and emotional: Remember the image of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, that God should take the cup of suffering from him? He was in anguish: so desperate, so emotional, we read that sweat was pouring off him like drops of blood.

And we have some sense of that anguish in Habakkuk’s prayer too. Why aren’t you answering, Lord? “How long?” “you do not save!” “Why do you make me look at injustice?” destruction and violence and fighting and quarrelling are everywhere.

It may not be fashionable, but there is a great scriptural tradition crying out in despair to God, complaining to God... we have the great psalms of lament – Psalm 13 “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? ... How long will my enemy triumph over me?” and psalm 88 “Why O Lord, do you reject me?... your wrath has swept over me”, psalm 130 “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord” and most famously of all, Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Habakkuk’s complaint to God is part of that ancient tradition of crying out to God which should be continuing today... and the problems that Habakkuk raises, are the problems that continue today. The problems that we should be praying about, week to week, day to day.

Habakkuk focusses on “Violence”, and violence is the opposite of peace. Violence is what happens when self-control fails. Violence is the result of interpersonal problems and frustrations turning to verbal and physical abuse. Streets become unsafe, crime rates rise and fighting and bullying and abuse become part of our lives.

Christians traditionally are divided on whether if pacifism is always the answer to violence, or if sometimes we need to engage in violence for the sake of justice and society. Christ’s command to turn the other cheek is to accept violence without responding with violence. But sometimes, it seems we do need to respond in kind, but if we do so – if we are driven to violence as individuals or

as a society – then it should only ever be with feelings similar anguish to that expressed by Habakkuk.

Habakkuk asks God how God can tolerate wrongdoing. There is evil in the world – there is corruption, and there is trouble and sorrow that results from it. What we typically call ‘sin’ – the rejection of God’s rule – is not only wrong, but it also has consequences. Personal consequences, and consequences to the whole of society.

In my last week of doing supply ministry at Pymble Uniting, back in 2016, a driver heading north on the Pacific Highway left the road, and managed to drive between the guard rail and the traffic lights and crashed into Pymble Uniting Church’s electronic sign. Fortunately, no one hurt. The sign was destroyed, though. It did seem that crashing into the sign probably saved the driver from injury – the stone wall of the church wasn’t far away.

News travelled fast within the congregation, as such news does. But the thing that really upset most people – me included – was that the police had decided not to charge the driver. He’d clearly done the wrong thing – a dangerous thing at that – but the police had let him off. He’d still have to pay an insurance excess and be without a car and so on, but he wasn’t charged.

And that’s what upset me. Until I got to thinking about forgiveness. Whether he was charged or not was no consequence to me or the congregation, except for our self-righteousness. And our desire for “justice to be done”.

But the police forgave. Just like God forgives each one of us. We don’t always appreciate how costly that forgiveness is. Our forgiveness cost God his only begotten son.

The destruction of a sign is really quite trivial. And it was fairly easily replaced. But destruction and violence – whether intentional or not, has consequences and cost... even if there is forgiveness.

Destruction and violence are all around. These days we often talk about sustainability, and the preservation of the environment and the wise use of the resources of the world. Destruction is the opposite – it is exploitation, if not outright plunder. Using things. Using people. Taking advantage. Pushing aside the weak, walking over the poor.

Habakkuk, in our reading today describes the law as paralysed and says that justice never prevails. The law can’t stop the corruption, nor can it stop of the destructiveness of people. The rule of law has so often given over to the rule of might.

The wicked hem in the righteous – they get the better of them and take advantage of them - and so justice is perverted. The people of God, are hemmed in by people of the world. They might be followers of other gods, or they might be people who acknowledge none at all, or they might be people who have drifted away and those who only superficially acknowledge God.

From verse 4, the lectionary compilers skip to chapter 2, which opens with Habakkuk waiting for God’s answer. And not simply getting on with his life hoping that God might spare him a response some day, but he was actively waiting for it. “I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.”

he says. It's very much a military analogy – standing watch as a soldier would, alert and on guard. At his appropriate station – on the ramparts so he can see a long way.

He is waiting for God's answer. He is ready for God's answer. He is open to receive God's answer, no matter what form that answer comes in.

And as Habakkuk's on watch, as he's ready and waiting for God's word, sure enough God answers him – though probably not with the answer he hoped for.

God's answer is clearly not just one for Habakkuk, but one for all the people who know God. "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." God says. The answer that God is giving is clear – it is plain. And it's to be written on tablets – so it would have been written into clay with a stylus, and then baked – so it's a permanent answer. Just like the ten commandments came down from Sinai on tablets, the reply is a lasting word from God. A message that God wants not only to be clear, but one that is to last as well.

God tells Habakkuk that "the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."

God has a plan. An appointed time to put things right. But it is God's time, not human time. As much as we might want to know that time, it is not revealed to us.

Jesus said: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark." (Matt 24:36-38).

People want to know when things will be put right. And while that's often from good motives – when will this suffering end? There's also often a degree of self-interest involved. If we knew when the end was coming, then we could do what we wanted and put our lives in order at the last minute, right? After all, who hasn't frantically cleaned their house only shortly before an important visitor is expected?

God warns Habakkuk that it may not be soon that the problems of the world are solved – it may seem slow in coming – but it won't linger... the time is set, but Habakkuk must wait for it. It will certainly come.

2600 years, people have been waiting. 2000 years ago, Jesus came and lived and died and rose again, confirming God's plan for our salvation. Dying in our place. Reconciling all people who turn to him in faith with God. But still we wait, we wait for the final fulfilment.

Sometimes people will point to the great events of our time as indicators that the end of the world is nigh... but Jesus warned his disciples against such things – he said "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines". (Mark 13:7-8)

But there was is nothing new in what Jesus described: Wars and rumours of wars, nations rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines - all those things are facts of the world. They are not signs of the end of the age, but facts of the current age. Throughout human history, wars, famines and natural disasters have always been with us.

And while they will always be with us, we, as Christians, are called to do what we can, to make peace, to feed the hungry, to cope with natural disasters. We must never ignore the needs of this world.

But while we attend to the needs of this world, to making peace, to feeding the hungry and tending the sick, we need to remember that those things are not the end in themselves, but rather the way in which we follow the example of Jesus, and serve God.

And finally, God's answer to Habakkuk contrasts two responses to God: The enemy who is 'puffed up' and the righteous who will live by their faithfulness.

The message that comes from God to Habakkuk, in response to Habakkuk's cries of complaint is simple, and it is clear, and it is permanent. God's answer to Habakkuk's cries is also the answer to our cries. God heard Habakkuk's cries. And God hears our cries too – and answers our cries, and will act in response to our cries.

The mission to save the world, to answer the cries of all of us who suffer, began when Jesus was born, was fulfilled in his death and resurrection, and will be brought to its ultimate completion in his return.

We as followers of Jesus need to wait patiently. To trust God. Because God has appointed a time, and that time will certainly come.

And as we wait, God's spirit dwells within us, assuring us of the hope we have in our saviour, now and forever. And we can always be assured that those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.

Amen.