

Trinity 21 2016 – Wrestling in Prayer

Genesis 32 vv 22-31 p36, Psalm 121, II Timothy 3 v14 – 4 v5 p1197, Luke 18 vv 1-8 p1052

Habakkuk 3: ¹⁷ *Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:* ¹⁸ *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.* ¹⁹ *The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.*

I came across this passage at Morning Prayer one day last week. It struck me as both wonderful and thought-provoking. *Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:* ¹⁸ *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.* Don't we praise God when things go well for us, when the fig tree blossoms, the vine bears fruit, our fields yield a rich harvest and our herds increase? Or, to bring Habakkuk up to date, don't we rejoice in the Lord, when we're in good health, we are doing the job we want to do, our houses are in good repair and we've got a little nest egg put by in the bank? Yet, when Habakkuk expects, prophesies even, that it's all going wrong, he can still exclaim, *The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.* Actually, he sings it. These are the words of Habakkuk's psalm. *To the chief singer on my stringed instruments,* it says.

When you get up out of your chair and walk across the room, do you really understand what you are doing? Do you know how electro-chemical impulses are generated in your brain? Can you explain how they are transmitted via your nervous system to your muscles? Do you know how nerves interact with muscles? Can you tell me how muscles contract? Can you describe the feedback systems in your body that coordinate the actions of all your nerves and muscles and maintain balance? Do you know what is the relationship between your mind deciding to get up and walk across the room and all these physical and chemical changes which begin in your brain and involve your whole body? If you can explain all this, you know more than any other human being on earth. In fact, however, you don't even have to think about getting up out of your chair and walking across the room. You don't have to understand the processes involved. You just do it.

Prayer's just like that. You don't have to understand prayer. You don't have to know how it works in order to pray. Just do what comes naturally. Just pray.

A baby learns to walk. A baby would probably eventually walk even if he or she never saw anybody else walk. Walking is intrinsic to being human. In the real world, however, babies do see other people walk. We encourage them to walk and help them. The same is true of prayer. It is natural to pray. Prayer is intrinsic to being human. We are made in the image of God. We are made to be His children. Yet we also learn by example when we see other people pray or when they pray with us, especially when the people we love pray with us. They may encourage us to pray and teach us how to pray. But it's not difficult. You don't have to know how prayer works. Just do it, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

You might value some tips on walking. Wear comfortable shoes. Don't walk near the edge of a crumbling cliff. Make sure you've had enough to eat and drink if you're walking far. If you're going to be an athlete, a coach may be able to support you and guide you. If you are going to be a soldier, you'll have to learn to march in time with others and carry a pack. Similarly, other Christians might be able to advise you about your prayer life. Make sure you make time every day for prayer. Don't forget thanksgiving and confession and pure adoration as well as just asking for things. When you do ask for things, ask unselfishly and ask for the things you genuinely believe are God's Will for you and for your friends, for the Church and the world. Don't forget the value of silence before God, and listening. Possibly, you have a special vocation to prayer and you might benefit from learning special techniques. But, for all that, prayer comes naturally. Just do it. It's as natural as walking, or even as breathing. In fact, just as you would very soon die, if you stopped breathing, you would quickly die spiritually if you stopped praying.

As you know, I pray in a fairly naive sort of way. If something is good, I pray for it. God can do anything and He loves me. If He doesn't give me what I ask for, well He knows what's best. I don't have to tell God what I need. He knows what I need before I ask Him. He knows what I need before I know what I need and He knows my needs better than I know them myself. That's why He doesn't always give me what I ask for. When I don't know how to pray, I still know that Jesus is praying for me and with me and the Holy Spirit is praying for me and with me. I also know that I am praying with the whole Church of God, with Christians all over the world and with Christians in heaven. That's an astonishing fellowship, isn't it, of the whole Church of God in and with and through the three persons of the Blessed, Holy Trinity, all one in love, through the shedding of Christ's Blood on the Cross.

My prayers are not telling God something He doesn't know, reminding Him of people He might have forgotten or suggesting to Him solutions to the world problems that He might not have thought of. Neither are yours. When we pray, we are aligning our wills with God's Will.

When the Bible speaks of God changing His mind in response to prayer, it is expressing a great mystery which is beyond human understanding within the limits of human language and comprehension. Why would God change His mind in response to the prayers of any human being, however holy? God is infinitely wiser and infinitely more loving than even the most spiritual of us. The more spiritual we are, the more we realise that. So why would God change His plans because we asked Him to? Our ideas couldn't possibly be better than His.

My explanation is this and it is a bit complicated. God foresees our prayers eternally. In other words, He knows what we are going to ask for in prayer long before we ask it, indeed since before time began. In fact, God inspires our prayers. Knowing what we shall, by His grace, pray for, God factors our prayers into His eternal plan for our individual lives, for our families and friends, for the world in general. In fact our prayers are a significant part of His plans for the whole of the cosmos. The whole of God's creation is consummated in Christ. We are the Body of Christ.

Usually, when we think of a magnet, we think of the horse shoe type with both poles pointing the same way. If you can think of a bar magnet, however, a straight magnet with the north pole at one end and the south pole at the other, what will happen if it is covered with a sheet of glass and iron filings are scattered on top of the glass? The answer is that the filings will align themselves in the direction of the two poles – north to south. They reveal a magnetic field, the force generated by the magnet. Each iron filing becomes a mini magnet with a north and a south pole. Lined up with the main magnet, they are each one part of the magnetic field – both orientated by the field and contributing to it. That is how I envisage the relationship between God and thousands of millions of Christians in prayer. Our lives are directed by Him and each one of us plays our part in His purposes. Our wills are aligned with His Will in prayer towards that great day when His Will will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. We are part of it, God's eternal plan for the fulfilment of His Creation.

It's good to pray in faith. That's what Habakkuk does in my text for today. He trusts God whatever happens. He lays his life before God and trusts God for the outcome. As Jesus says, we don't have to use vain repetition, thinking that God will do what we want if we keep on at Him like a toddler who wants an ice cream. When we ask lots of other people to pray for us, it isn't because we think God will be more likely to hear us if we all shout together. Rather, it's an expression of our fellowship in love that we pray together with a common purpose. When lots of people pray, they are united in thanksgiving for God's answer to their prayer. II Corinthians 1: ¹¹ *Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf.*

But is all this too easy? Is it too serene, complacent even. *Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:* ¹⁸ *Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.* How many people honestly have faith like Habakkuk? The life of faith often isn't easy. It's a struggle. We can't understand what God is doing. Why does He allow this? Why didn't He prevent that? Doesn't this person deserve to be healed of that terrible illness? Why do the wicked so often prosper and the righteous suffer? What are you playing at, God? Aren't you listening to my prayers? Can't you hear? Don't you care? It's all there in the Bible, if people would only read it. The people of God in Scripture experience what they perceive to be the absence of God. They feel desolate, alone and let down. Even when doing Christian work, they experience opposition, discouragement and what they take to be failure, though only God really knows the outcome of our efforts. The people of God in Scripture struggled as do the people of God in every age, including our own. They struggled with the world they had to contend with. They struggled with their faith. They strove with God. St Paul tells Timothy: ¹⁶ *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:* ¹⁷ *That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.* Timothy is having a hard time as the first Bishop of the Church of Ephesus. Paul can't make it easy for him, but he can assure Timothy that God is with him and that God will provide for him and for his work. He can point Timothy towards the resources he needs: the things he reads in the Scriptures; the power of prayer, his own prayer and that of the whole Church; the grace that God has specifically given to

Timothy so that he can fulfil his vocation as a minister of the Church. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives encouragement for us when we feel that we pray and pray and pray but God isn't listening or doesn't care or, for no good reason, won't do something which we are sure must be in accordance with His Will, such as bringing the war in Syria to an end or curing a loved one of a deadly disease. Jesus says, even an unjust judge, may eventually give judgment if only to get rid of a nagging woman, but God isn't an unjust judge. He loves us and cares for us. He will answer all our needs. Just trust Him and keep on praying.

And what's the Jacob story all about, wrestling all night with a man who is God? It resonates with some people's experience of God to the point that Wesley even wrote a hymn based on it – this struggle with God which finally brings salvation.

Come, O thou Traveller unknown,
whom still I hold, but cannot see;
my company before is gone,
and I am left alone with thee,
with thee all night I mean to stay,
and wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell thee who I am,
my misery or sin declare;
thyself hast called me by my name,
look on thy hands, and read it there.
But who, I ask thee, who art thou?
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

In vain thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold:
Art thou the Man that died for me?

The secret of thy love unfold:
Wrestling, I will not let thee go
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

Yield to me now, for I am weak
but confident in self-despair;
speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
be conquered by my instant prayer.
Speak, or thou never hence shalt move,
and tell me, if thy name is Love.

'Tis Love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear thy whisper in my heart:
the morning breaks, the shadows flee.
Pure universal Love thou art;
thy mercies never shall remove,
thy nature and thy name is Love.

I think I'll leave it there. If you remember from two weeks ago, Habakkuk also wrestled and prayed and watched and listened before he came to the faith he affirms in our main text for today. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, do what Jesus said to do. *Watch and pray*. God is the deepest mystery and our closest friend. Heaven cannot contain Him, yet He is nearer than our hands and feet. Our whole lives can be a conversation with God.

Ye saints, who toil below,
adore your heavenly King,
and onward as ye go
some joyful anthem sing;
take what he gives
and praise him still,
through good or ill,
who ever lives!

My soul, bear thou thy part,
triumph in God above:
and with a well-tuned heart
sing thou the songs of love!
Let all thy days
till life shall end,
whate'er he send,
be filled with praise!