

2.10.2016 Christ Church, Walmersley

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4. 2 Timothy 1:1-14. Luke 17:5-10.

I knew Lucy. She was a woman in the parish. She went to church every now and again. She was caring, intelligent, engaging and alive. Her parents were still alive. Then one day, she said that her father had got cancer and the cancer had spread. Her father gradually became more ill. Lucy prayed for her father. She meant her prayers and said them with sincerity and out of love of her father. Her father's illness deepened. Lucy's prayers became more frantic. The cancer treatment was not working, and nor were her prayers. God was not saving her father. Then it became clear that Lucy's father was going to die. And Lucy changed her prayers. She prayed that her father might die quickly. He didn't. He died a long, slow death. After her father's death Lucy came to see me. She outlined the prayers she had said and why and with tears streaming down her face she said: 'If God loved us he would have helped. Why wasn't he there?'

'Why wasn't God present? Why didn't God answer my prayers when I needed him?' are basic questions about what happens to many of us. The prophet Habakkuk talked to God. 'How long, O Lord, have I cried to thee unanswered? I cry, "Violence!", but thou dost not save...'. Habakkuk knew that he had told God that the society was riven with the activities of the violent and that violence stalked the land. But God did not answer. God was not there. And as violence rose and was unanswered. Consequently, 'law grows effete....the wicked outwit the righteous and so justice comes out perverted'. And still God is silent. God is silent.

There are a number of points to be drawn from this. Firstly, we are actually responsible for much of how we are. Habakkuk's complaint of violence reflects a basic collapse of society and social rule whereby the rich and powerful drive the forces of violence. This is not God's responsibility but ours. However, it is good to know if God is actually with the righteous.

Secondly, we could say that God answers us in various ways. We may not understand how God is answering us. But God is answering our prayers. Unfortunately this argument does not help

us when faced with Lucy's despairing cry of where was God? There is no answer to Lucy, no response, just silence.

Lucy's story comes from parish life. There is another story. This comes from the death camp at Auschwitz. The Jews imprisoned there discussed amongst themselves why God was letting happen their extermination. Eventually God was put on trial. The judges found God guilty of silence in the face of extermination. Then a rabbi stood up and he said, 'Having found God guilty, let us go forth and worship God'. This latches back into the book of Job. Job is assailed by illness and disgrace allowed by God. Job argued that God had acted unjustly but how could he get justice from God from God himself? Job bows his head to the whirlwind and accepts that God is God and Job is human.

The rabbis at Auschwitz who found God guilty then went out to worship the same God. They bowed their heads to the whirlwind and said that God is God.

For Christians there is a profound story that leads us to encounter God at the very depths of human existence. That story is the story of the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the innocent man. He is tempted but does not sin. He is the one who challenges the injustice of the local rulers. An innocent man is tried at a travesty of a trial. Pilate recognises that Jesus is 'The man'. Jesus is the one who represents every person, men, women, young old, black, white. And Jesus is crucified, an innocent man. Mark records that at the heart of the crucifixion, Jesus cried out, 'Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani'. 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

Jesus, God's beloved, knows what it is to be abandoned by God and have to face that question of where is God. Lucy's question finds its resonance in the story of the crucifixion. It is as though the feeling of abandonment is something that Jesus, and all men and women may have to go through.

But there is a mystery here. Jesus is raised from death to new life in the explosion that is the resurrection. This is a profound mystery. Mark's gospel, the first of the gospels to be written has no real resurrection, just an empty tomb and the instruction to meet Jesus in Galilee. Matthew has a limited sense of resurrection; Matthew is the second gospel to be written. Later, Luke is written and Luke tells ornamental stories about the resurrection. The last gospel, John, tells profound and complex stories about the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection takes place at about 33AD. It is not until, about 75AD that there is a full understanding of the resurrection. The resurrection is so profound that comprehension takes time to emerge.

In the resurrection God shows us that even death, which each of us has to go through, even death does not, ultimately, sever us from the love of God. Death is a normal part of life. Resurrection is a normal part of death.

Lucy had to learn this. Over time, as we held her in our prayers and in giving her time to talk and ask all her questions, gradually Lucy learned that she was held by a community that loved her and would help her ask her questions. It mattered to Lucy that we, too, asked where God was in her father's death. She was not alone. Over time, Lucy came to learn that God held her as she felt abandoned, as she faced the silence of God. And gradually Lucy even knew that she was touched by the mystery of the resurrection and somehow she was being changed.

But two things emerge here. Firstly, we, the religious communities are responsible to hold and help the Lucy's of this world. This means not giving quick answers but allowing time for Lucy to ask her questions. We are the hands of Christ, the hands that hold Lucy in love and tenderness and ask with her, 'Where is God?' The church community acts as the body of Christ.

Secondly, Lucy must be free to ask her questions and do so in the way she wants. Many times, Lucy was profoundly angry about God. We have to accept that anger and work with it. This demands that we know that part of her exploration involves anger, even the loathing of God. This is strong meat. It demands real love and real care, and the willingness to really hear what is

being said, and bear with whatever is being said. Over time, and through much repetition, Lucy came to know that God experienced the abandonment her father went through. That God would even change her father through the mystery of the resurrection.

Lucy came to a resolution of the question of where was God. She grew enormously through this process. Lucy encountered her own death and found her own resurrection. Her father had died, but would be touched by the resurrection light. Lucy had to shed her old life and find her new life in the resurrection of Jesus.