

Sermon on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

November 19, 2017

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Year 1, Proper 28: Psalms 19, 46; Habakkuk 1:1–17; Luke 16:1–13

“Then [the Chaldeans] sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god! . . . Therefore [the wicked man] sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his seine; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich” [Habakkuk 1:11, 16].

We live at a moment in history when talk about power and the misuse of power is inescapable. There are strong men in many nations, on every continent, who rule with an iron fist. Sometimes their reign endures so long that they seem to be immortal, immune to the changes and chances of time or to the will of their people. And then there are men, as we’ve come to realize in recent days, if we didn’t realize it already, who exercise their power not on the international stage, but domestically, in the home or at the office, in the hotel bar or in the room upstairs. And some of those men, too, have seemed impervious to challenge or criticism, and incapable of change.

And all this talk of power can get tricky, either because such talk can begin to sound like jargon, or because it is so partisan. We are discovering to our shame that, all too often, we claim that *your* man is an irredeemable scoundrel, but *my* man deserves the benefit of the doubt. It's hard to get clear about right and wrong, when what you care about most is your own team and its triumphs.

And into this confusion, into this cacophony, walks the prophet Habakkuk, who reminds us that the problem of strong men and the misuse of power is something very ancient. And he diagnoses the disease for us: the tyrant worships his own might. He bows down at the altar of his own ego, and his own wiliness, treachery, and trickery. Right and wrong don't come into it, because he is in love with his power and his ability to subject and humiliate. The prophet reminds us to ask, "Who, or what, do you worship?" And suggests that the answer to that question will tell us everything that we need to know.

The might of the strong man is an enduring problem. It was a problem that troubled Habakkuk greatly. It troubled him enough to question God and demand an answer: "O Lord, why do you look on the treacherous,

and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?” (1:13).

And the answer, once given, may not answer all questions, but it is surely correct. The Lord says to the prophet, “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by faith” (2:4).

If that is true, and I think it is, then we have a place to start and we have a place to stand. We may ask, “Whom do I worship?” And the answer can be sobering. It is hard to accept that one has been worshipping false gods—things, other people, or one’s own ego. But in the end, the symptoms themselves beg for a cure, if only we will pay attention—the prophet cries out, “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them.” How painful, how difficult, it is to live with a distorted spirit that has forgotten who to worship. But the prophet shows us a way out—take your stand, turn to the Lord, turn to him in faith, and do not be afraid, never be ashamed to pray, along with the psalmist, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and steadfast spirit with in me. Do not cast

me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me” (Psalm 51:10-11).

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