

27th Sunday, year C, October 3, 2010

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Ps: 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; 2 Tim 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10
“Lord, increase our faith.”

David Hollenbach, S.J.

Today’s readings speak directly to the horrifying violence we are so often witnessing in recent days. Here in the Mattapan neighborhood of our city, on Tuesday the drug-related murder of a two year old toddler in the arms of his mother also left two naked men dead on the street. This was just the latest round in what the Globe called a “season of senseless death.” On the world scene, on Friday the UN issued a 500 page report on the horrendous wave of violence that has sent many millions to their death in eastern Congo and left huge numbers of women deeply wounded by mass rape.

In our first reading, the prophet Habakkuk faced a similarly violent scene. Though biblical scholars are not certain when Habakkuk wrote, the most likely time was around 600 BC, in the midst of the thoroughly corrupt regime of King Jehoiakim of Judah and when the Babylonian empire was on the verge of conquering the Jewish people. Habakkuk’s days were a time of terror and destruction. The people are already close to despair. The prophet exclaims in agony: “How long, O LORD? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me.”

When the prophet cries to God over this violence, strife, and discord, God responds in a way that might not seem very reassuring. God calls Habakkuk and the Jewish people to keep their faith alive in the midst of their suffering. How can faith make a difference in the midst of violence and social disaster? This call to faith is an invitation for the people to keep before their eyes the vision of what God did for them in the past, when he freed them from slavery, oppression, and violence in Egypt. God calls them to continue believing and trusting in this vision of God's love and care for them. As the prophet puts it, "the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late."

God reassures the people that the vision is reliable. Despite the violence, God is faithful and will not abandon them. They, too, should remain faithful to the vision. This means not giving up hope. Keeping that hope alive will sustain their lives. Because of their faithfulness to the vision--their faith-- they shall live.

This message was on display at a conference I recently attended in Oxford, England, on the role of faith-based organizations in responding to humanitarian crises like those in eastern Congo, Haiti, and post-Katrina New Orleans. Faith-based, religious organizations like Catholic Relief Services are regularly among the most visible groups responding to these crises. Why? The crises raise questions like those faced by Habakkuk, questions that are finally religious ones about

ultimate meaning. Have evil and destruction have gained the upper hand or is there a source of hope that can enable the victims and those aiding them to struggle actively for a better future?

The vision of the prophet Habakkuk is that God will remain faithful, no matter what. The Christian vision—the vision of the death and resurrection of Jesus—shows us that God is not only for us when we face suffering or violence, but with us in the midst of anguish. When God calls us to faith when we face struggle, God is truly present with us, within our suffering and that of the world, just as Jesus was. God promises to bring forth new life, even from death.

Faith in God, therefore, can keep us going when we face the injustice and violence in Mattapan or Congo. It can also sustain us if we face illness ourselves or the death of one we love. It can also energize us to come to the aid of others who face suffering and loss, just as it makes faith-based communities and organizations so prominent in responding to crises like Haiti or Congo. In God's kingdom, the wicked cannot write the last chapter. As Habakkuk says, "The vision . . . presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come." Waiting this way is living by faith... the powerfully active faith that leads us work to the overcome the violence and injustice around us. So let's pray with the apostles in today's gospel: "Lord, increase our faith"