

Most ordinations take place at Petertide, because Peter was the rock on which the church was founded. This is no doubt a source of inspiration for new clergy, and it provides a necessary reminder that we are all part of the one church. Quite a lot of clergy, especially new ones, also take comfort from the precedent set by Peter's unerring ability to put his foot in it. If he could make so many blunders and be forgiven, there's hope for the rest of us too. But probably at least as many ordinations take place on St Thomas's day as on St Peter's day, and that is also encouraging. Thomas wanted to see for himself. He wasn't prepared to believe something just because other people told him. He had been a faithful disciple, but he needed some help at a crucial moment, as do we all at one time or another.

Because of the way the calendar works, we only celebrate the feast of St Thomas about once every six years, and yet we are thoroughly familiar with his story. It is read on the Sunday after Easter every year – though if you are always away on holiday then you may still have missed it. But what we don't get after Easter is today's splendid reading from the Book of Habbakuk.

Who on earth was Habbakuk? You may well ask – and he may not even have been called Habbakuk. The first Greek version of the Old Testament calls him Hambakoum. When I went to look him up I found that the commentary I have was suspiciously clean and crisp, so obviously I haven't been paying much attention to him either. He is one of the minor prophets, and when I say 'minor' I mean as in 'less significant', not as in 'digging underground', and although we know very little about him he definitely wasn't underground. He didn't suddenly appear out of nowhere, like, for example, Amos. He is thought to have been one of the official temple prophets whose job was to interpret oracles for the people to understand.

This very unobtrusive minor prophet, who was alive at about the same time as Jeremiah, has produced a passage which is remarkably appropriate for today. It is appropriate for Michael because, in just a few words, it describes one of the most important duties of a leader of God's people – to stand at the watch-post, position oneself on the rampart and keep watch to see what God will say. To be visible. To be out at the front, not hiding, not afraid to take a stand. To demonstrate to everyone that you are certain God will speak, because you are waiting confidently for that to happen. You may have to wait, but it will happen. You're not afraid of looking silly or being ridiculed. God will speak, and when he does it's your job, like Habbakuk, to listen and then to explain his words and actions to the people. Ordination makes you a publicly-authorized official Christian representative. You are a prophet as well as a pastor.

God's answer to Habbakuk is also extraordinarily important for us now. The last couple of months have been thoroughly unpleasant – at times disgusting – and the events of the last ten days have been unprecedented. Everyone is surprised, unsettled and nervous, and some of the nastier elements of the population have taken the opportunity to behave disgracefully. Underneath it all I still believe that we live in a country and a society which is fundamentally generous and tolerant. But it is hard to hang on to that belief in the face of the headlines, the graffiti, the interviews, and some of the snatches of conversation I've overheard on buses and in shops. But God, through Habbakuk, has an answer for us. Listen to him:

‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.’

We can reclaim decent behaviour, generosity of spirit and a welcome and friendship for those who are frightened and hungry, who have no security and nowhere to call home. We can live happily and openly in a diverse community where there is mutual respect. We can express our own opinions, listen attentively to others and resist the pressure to silence anyone who disagrees with us. We can create a society where we don’t assess every proposal through the prism of: ‘What’s in it for me?’ Love and friendship and compassion and mercy are infectious. There is an unending supply – the more we show, the more they grow.

Write the vision. Make it plain on tablets (and iPads, and Twitter streams and Facebook postings) so that a runner may read it (or even someone meandering along the pavement glued to their mobile phone). There is a vision for the appointed time. It will come, and it will repay the waiting. But there is a warning too, in the very last sentence.

‘Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them.’

How easy to think that we are not the proud: and immediately we have fallen into the trap of judging ourselves to be better than other people. We haven’t waited to hear what God will say. We are proclaiming our own certainties as if they are his message. Far better to admit, with Thomas, that we don’t know, we aren’t certain, but we believe, we have faith. Far better to pray with the psalmist, as Habbakuk would have done: ‘Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.’