

SERMON – 2/10/22

Luke 17:5-10

"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Make our faith greater.'" (Luke 17:5)

As we celebrate and give thanks today for the gift of the harvest which for us in this part of the world has been a year of plenty in the face of serious economic challenges, I would like to reflect with you on the gift of faith and in particular to ponder with you the image that Jesus gives us of faith as a seed.

I never cease to be amazed at the wonder of the unstoppable gift of life, so powerfully demonstrated at this time of year when we harvest the fruit of the land: foodstuffs as diverse as potatoes and brambles, apples and barley which in themselves not only supply our need for sustenance but also contain within them seed so abundant that it could never all be planted. What an incredible thing - "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Not just functional but incredibly beautiful as well. How good and gracious God is and we do well to pause in humble gratitude rather than simply stacking our larders and stuffing our faces. What a marvel of God-given abundance – even the pesky pips of the humble bramble promise plenty and within every single apple are multiple seeds hidden within each one of which is the potential to grow a tree that will stand for decades and harvest basketfuls of beautiful fruit.

Would we ask God to give us greater seed? Perhaps, if the harvest had been poor (as it is for many in our world) and we had to choose between eating or retaining seed for next year's planting we might understandably ask for more. But would we ask God to make our seed bigger? Of course not – the size of the bramble pip or the seed potato is irrelevant – and yet here are Jesus' disciples asking Him to make their faith greater! Perhaps we have misunderstood what faith is.

Many of us struggle with a sense that our faith is somehow lacking and that if we could but muster a greater faith, then everything would be so much better for us. 'I wish I had more

faith,' some people say – which means that they are longing for an ability to trust God with a greater part of their life or the courage to entrust to God something of greater significance than they have done hitherto.

The fact that the apostles themselves were asking Jesus the same kind of question that many of us find ourselves asking, and that they received an answer, is surely a great encouragement. Until, that is, you try to make sense of Jesus' reply that we have read this morning. Well, that is our task today. And of course, despite what folk often say about their struggles with the Old Testament Scriptures or the teachings of the apostle Paul, I think that it's actually the words of Jesus Himself that are the hardest to deal with in the whole Bible.

'Make our faith greater,' the disciples plead. And, as so often in His teaching, Jesus paints pictures of everyday things and everyday situations without always spelling out exactly what the message is. I suspect that Jesus often spoke with an enigmatic smile on his lips and left His hearers wondering whether He was completely serious in what He was saying or whether He was just getting them to look at themselves, and the world, and God in a way that they had never done before.

Let me highlight three things in our passage this morning and then explore with you what they might mean in the context of the struggles of faith.

The first image is the mustard seed, an image Jesus uses elsewhere in describing the Kingdom of God that grows from a tiny seed into one of the biggest trees. The second thing is the image of a mulberry tree being pulled up by the roots and planted again, this time in the sea. I think there is a bit of a chuckle behind Jesus' words there, rather like there is when he paints the pictures elsewhere of a camel passing through the eye of a needle and a person struggling to remove a speck of sawdust from their friend's eye while there's a great big plank of wood protruding from their own. And then finally there is the everyday workplace story of the master and the servant where the master expects the servant to finish their work before they can sit down

to a meal, and where there is no word of thanks for someone who is just doing their duty.

We might puzzle long and hard about the significance of these images (and that is exactly what the preacher's task is in preparation for pulpit ministry). What message is there for us in this passage, particularly when it comes to the sense we often have that our faith is somehow lacking and that everything would be so much better if we only had a greater faith.

Well, let me offer to you some of my reflections, and extend the invitation to you also to share your own reflections with me and with one another. Let those who have ears, hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

First of all, when the apostles ask Jesus, 'Make our faith greater,' what are they actually hoping for? And what do we hope for when we express the wish that our faith would be more than it is? Are we not just looking with the first disciples for a quick fix, for the waving of some magic wand that will fast track us to spiritual maturity? Wouldn't it be great if all of a sudden each one of us could be a spiritual giant, the kind of person that people looked up to for our faith in God. Well that's a wee bit like the person who prays for patience and wants it right now. If we had the kind of faith that caused mountains to move and mulberry bushes to be uprooted and planted again in the sea, what would be the point of that, exactly? We would be living in a kind of Harry Potter world of extraordinary happenings that would do little to advance the Kingdom but lots to promote competition and jealousy amongst believers. I suspect we would all be vying for greater and greater faith, with more and more mulberry bushes relocated into the sea, with magazine articles galore about the astonishing faith of this celebrity believer or that, but nothing much achieved for the Kingdom of God.

By contrast, secondly, Jesus downplays the role of the individual disciple: "When you have done all you have been told to do, say 'We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty.'" That's not very glamorous, is it? Jesus is saying that faith is not about uprooting mulberry bushes; it is about obedience, as Paul recognises at the very beginning and at the very end of his letter

to the Romans when he describes the goal of the Gospel as being to enable all nations to 'believe and obey' (Romans 1:5 and 16:26).

At the end of the day, surely our faith must be more about God than it is about us, surely our discipleship must be more about serving God than about receiving plaudits for our achievements. "Only believe, says the hymn-writer, and thou shalt see that God is all in all to thee." How much would be accomplished, I wonder, if each one of us stepped out in the obedience of faith, if we simply did our duty and in so doing fulfilled God's purpose for us? Maybe we need to think about that the next time we are tempted to ask God to increase our faith.

But, thirdly and I think most importantly, it is the mustard seed idea that holds the key for us. The 1st century Roman writer, Pliny the Elder, wrote of mustard that "when it is sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once." Mustard has also been described as "a pungent shrub with dangerous take-over properties." (J.D. Crossan) In common parlance we might describe it as a weed, the kind of plant that takes over and runs rampant. And isn't that actually the most wonderful image for the Kingdom of God, and the most challenging way to describe faith! And it is true to reality, for when we trust God with small things and discover that He is faithful, we soon find that it is the most natural thing in the world to trust Him with much greater things. The seed of faith soon multiplies all on its own and without any significant input from us.

Do you see why I think Jesus might have spoken of these things with some humour? The disciples are asking for a greater faith, but Jesus is telling them that the size of their faith is immaterial, because the significance of faith is not to be found in the one doing the trusting but in the One in whom the trust is put, the One who gives the increase in the spiritual realm just as wonderfully as He does in the realm of nature. The point is not whether I have a little faith in God or an average faith in God or an exceptional faith in God, but that the tiny seed of faith that I have is faith in a truly exceptional God, the God whom Paul

describes in his letter to the Ephesians as being 'able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.' (Ephesians 3:20)

The disciples ask Jesus to make their faith greater. We also long for a firmer grasp of faith. But why? Is it so that we can be the object of people's admiration or so that God can be honoured and God's ways prevail? Surely, if our faith is in God, it is simply our duty to exercise it, no prizes for the number of mulberry trees uprooted or mountains moved. Our faith should not be about uprooting mulberry trees or whatever today's must-have result may be in Christian circles. It should be about extending the Kingdom of God, unleashing those 'dangerous take-over properties' on an unsuspecting world, and allowing God to hold sway in the everyday things of ordinary life as well as in the major events on the world stage.

We might be well advised to be careful what we wish for in the realm of faith. If we are serious when we ask God to increase our faith and if we are serious in fulfilling our duty as servants of God, simply exercising our faith through obedience of God, then we should be prepared for our prayers to be answered, not necessarily through astonishing signs and wonders (although those can never be ruled out) but through the steady spread and growth of the Kingdom from a tiny mustard seed into a great tree and a fruitful harvest. All we need to do is to take the seed that God Himself has given and plant it, then just to let go and let God have His way. That is faith.