

SERMON – 5/10/25

Luke 17:1-10

"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" (Luke 17:27)

If anything might be a text for a Sunday sermon it is this short and simple prayer of Jesus' first followers which could (and perhaps should) be our prayer not just today, not just when we gather to reflect upon God's Word, but regularly during the course of the day, every day. 'Increase our faith!' It might be said to echo one of the other fundamental prayers of the Church – 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done' – through which we long for and seek after the way of Christ. 'Increase our faith!'

You don't need someone like me to tell you that life can often be challenging and that living life trusting in Christ, far from offering an easier road, can actually be harder. It was as they listened to Jesus' teaching (just as we are doing this morning) that the first disciples, those who would be His apostles, cried out to the Lord to increase their faith, to empower them as they sought to rise to the challenges He was presenting them with. So as we listen for Christ's prompting of us this morning let's pray together:

Lord Jesus, increase our faith this morning, empower us by your Spirit that your Kingdom may come in us and through us and that your will may be done on earth, here in Kinross and wherever you may send us, just as it is in heaven, today and every day. Amen.

I imagine that it is your experience (as it is mine) that while there are times when to be a Christian means that you are on top of the world, filled with joy, full of praise for God, with a sense of fulfilment in everything you are involved with, there are also times when to be a Christian means feeling completely overburdened by the struggle of going against the flow in the world, saddened by the general disregard there is for the things of God, even wondering if it is worth persevering. You only need to read the psalms to realise that God's people have always experienced the full spectrum of emotions as they go through life – there is exuberant praise and there are expressions of deep trust in God but there are also yearning questions and doubts and

loud cries of affliction and anger also directed at God, and all of these things are fine – God has big shoulders and would far rather that we yell at Him than turn away from Him.

The NIV translation heads the verses that we read this morning 'Sin, Faith and Duty' and that's actually a very succinct summary of what Jesus is speaking about here. And what I would like to do this morning is to offer you three pieces of stunningly good news alongside three really significant challenges in the living of the life of faith and to suggest that we should lean into those challenges with that prayer 'Increase our faith' rather than yielding to the temptation just to shrug our shoulders and give up when the going gets tough.

Jesus never said that to follow Him would be easy – quite the contrary. He said, 'If any of you would be my disciple you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me' – not an easy path. So, Lord, increase our faith, and may your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven.

The first challenge we encounter in this morning's reading is the Christian's calling to forgive, not just now and again but as a matter of course. Impossible, you might say. There are always going to be reasons not to forgive a particular person. Even in the example Jesus gives here of someone who has been sinned against by the same person seven times in the same day and that person has come back seven times and repented of what they have done, you could quite legitimately question how genuine the repentance had been, their 'sorry' just a meaningless word. But what does Jesus say? "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, 'I repent,' *you must forgive them.*" (v.4)

I think most of us find that pretty hard to swallow even in this kind of abstract, theoretical context never mind when a complete stranger has taken something that belongs to you, or a friend has dragged your name through the mud in public spouting a catalogue of untruths. Jesus says, 'You must forgive them.' Now that's a challenge if ever there was one. Lord, increase our faith, and may your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Because in our self-righteousness what we all forget is that from heaven we who have sinned and sinned and sinned again have been forgiven by God no matter how half-hearted our repentance often is and no matter how soon we will be falling short in exactly the same way. If Jesus can say to us, 'Go in peace, your sins are forgiven,' how can we (how dare we) do anything other than forgive those who wrong us?

The second challenge we come to in this morning's passage is the challenge to attempt the impossible for God. What we *hear* Jesus saying here is that if we have even the tiniest scrap of faith we should be able to do miraculous things like uprooting mulberry trees and planting them in the sea (as if that was a useful spiritual gift!) For us the impossible might be peace in the Middle East or in Ukraine, or the reversal of church decline in our country. Do we have faith for that? We are inclined to hear what Jesus says as something burdensome, something that casts doubt on our faith and we are tempted to respond by saying: Well, if I can't uproot mulberry trees and plant them in the sea, it must mean my faith is somehow defective. But if we start thinking like that we've missed the point altogether. Of *course* it's a challenge to have faith because it goes completely against our human nature. By nature we think that we have to *earn* whatever comes to us and that we have to be in control of the outcomes of our actions. But what Jesus is saying here is that even the tiniest faith can unleash great power and can accomplish the unimaginable because it is dependent not on the one doing the believing – you or me – but on the One being believed in – that is the Lord. The good news about faith is that it has got nothing to do with how much *we* can achieve and everything to do with what God is capable of. It is very far from being another burden to bear – it is in fact the *lifting* of a burden we simply cannot carry ourselves. Lord, increase our faith, and may your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven. The good news is that what is impossible for us is possible for God and if you are ready to lay down your own accomplishments and leave the future with God, then it'll be a lot more significant things than mulberry trees that are uprooted.

But finally, we come to perhaps the hardest challenge of the three we have heard from Jesus' lips this morning. (Apologies if you thought forgiveness and faith were difficult). I don't know about you but the story Jesus tells of the servants coming in from their day's work in the fields and being required to prepare the master's dinner before finally being allowed to go and labour to make themselves some food sounds pretty tough to me. Is God really like that master in the way He treats His servants?

Wouldn't we rather expect to see Christ overturn the way of the world and welcome His servants in from their day's labour to sit at tables laden with fine food and drink all prepared and ready for them, and He Himself kneeling with a basin of water and a clean towel to bathe their aching feet and wash their dirty hands?

Not here. The point Jesus is making in these verses is that if we are His disciples we are servants of God who owe God absolutely everything and that there is nothing He cannot expect of us.

Nothing. There is an ancient prayer of the Church that describes service of God as 'perfect freedom' and the challenge that we are given here is that if we hold out for what we think of as our human rights we will remain earth-bound, hanging on to something that is fundamentally broken and destined for the grave whereas, counter-intuitively, if we are prepared to surrender ourselves completely to serve God, indeed to give our lives to what is in reality a kind of slavery – let's not sugar-coat it – it is then in fact that we discover life in all its fulness and enter into the joy of the Lord and the fullest extent of the blessing that there is to be discovered in relationship with God through Christ.

If I had remembered about a hymn of George Matheson's earlier in the week we might have sung it this morning, but allow me to quote a few lines from it in closing since they hit the mark, I think:

"Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.
Force me to render up my sword and I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life's alarms when by myself I stand;
Imprison me within thine arms, and strong shall be my hand.

My will is not my own till thou hast made it thine;
If it would reach a monarch's throne, it must its crown resign.

It only stands unbent amid the clashing strife
When on thy bosom it has leant, and found in thee its life."

Make no mistake, we have heard challenging words from the lips of Jesus this morning, calling us to forgive others, calling us to rely on God alone by faith, calling us to the way of dutiful obedience. But I hope that you have also heard with trumpet-like clarity the promises of God that stand alongside those challenges – the offer to you and me of complete forgiveness in Christ, the promise to you and me that in Christ the impossible is possible, and the declaration that if the Son of God sets you free you shall be free indeed.

So join me in praying with the apostles: "Lord, increase our faith!" And may your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven.