

Sermon for Sunday 2nd October 2022, 10.30 and 5.0 services

Reading: Luke 17: 5-10

The reading for today is taken from a section titled "Sin, faith, duty". The lectionary reading omits the first part of the chapter, which deals with sin, and we'll have a quick read through that because it sets the context for our reading which starts with the request, no, I think the plea: "Lord, increase our faith!"

So why the plea? Let's read and see what Jesus said to them first.

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³ So watch yourselves.

"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴ 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."

Here Jesus talks of the troubles life in the world brings into our lives, but cautions us to beware of being someone who brings harm "to these little ones" by which I expect most of us think he means children, though it could be anyone who is bullied, or has been caused to act in a way that harms himself or another, or do something that is not God's way of doing things. Jesus then goes on to say we are to forgive even seven times in a day, if the person has repented each time. I think seven in this case indicates a lot of times, although seven in scripture can indicate something is finished, like creation in seven days. But the point is we must forgive, unless there is abusive action going on, in which case, please seek help. Speak to the Church warden Carol or the readers, or look for a number to call on the board at the back.

So the burden of sin could be very heavy indeed, and brings us to the first verse of our reading:

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

There are two things to note in this verse: These words must have seemed very strong indeed. But Jesus sometimes did use strong language to drive home the points he made. I'm sure we have sometimes dealt with someone, beginning with very polite, diplomatic language but as the message didn't go in, ending with very direct speaking? Jesus *is* using very direct language to make his point.

Secondly, the apostles ask for their faith to be increased. If their faith is to be increased, it must be there in the first place, but they want it to be increased, deepened might be another word.

A question aside: Is faith like pregnancy – pregnancy is either there or not, you can't be a little bit pregnant! We are told faith is a gift of God. A gift can be received, but left unopened. Or is faith more like a tree grown from a seed or nut, starts small, grows to be large? Whatever our thoughts are, the apostles asked Jesus that their faith be increased.

And what is Jesus' reply?

⁶ He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

Here Jesus is saying that even a small amount of faith can do mighty, even impossible, things. Uprooting a tree is hard work, and the notion of a tree being planted in the sea is virtually impossible, unless it's planted close to the sea's edge, but still, most trees do not thrive in salt water – although yes, some do. But the image of a tree in the Middle East would not likely be one of those. So even a small amount of faith, small as a mustard seed, which is only a bit bigger than a full stop in a book, can accomplish amazing, even miraculous, things. But this passage ends with a strange phrase, "it will obey you". The tree will do what it has been commanded to do, it will obey I wonder if obedience is a key to having what we call more faith, a deeper faith?

At work, we have a job description, and by taking the job, we agree to the duties and responsibilities contained in it. So as we read on, Jesus talks of a servant who's been hired for a job.

⁷ "Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?

So here we have a servant ploughing or looking after sheep, but often in those times, servants were also required to look after the master in the house as well. That's why v8 says "Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper ... ' "and so on. Part of the servant's job description is to get the supper sorted, immediately. Now we might think it would be very nice if the master asked the servant to sit down and have a cool drink first, and indeed it would be, but if the servant's job includes getting the supper *he* might well prefer to get that part of his job done so he can completely relax and enjoy his own supper. In fact, that is what he is supposed to do, it is part of his job description, he might be glad to sit and have a drink before, but it may make him uneasy, knowing that is not how it is meant to work and there's still work to be done.

Just after the Queen died, a discussion thread appeared on my FaceBook feed, people were saying the Royal family should be allowed time out to grieve, not undertaking engagements. And I thought about this. But it occurred to me that members of the Royal family have been brought up to carry out their duties, and of course there were constitutional things that had to be done. Maybe the system needs changing to make it a bit more compassionate in difficult circumstances. But the royals all did their duties, even down to Prince George and Princess Charlotte attending the funeral of the Queen, their Grannie. However, when all the duty was done - and wasn't it done well! - they all took a week off. So a bit like the servant who got the master's supper, they waited until the ceremonial was finished, then had time off.

Further, getting supper was in the servant's job description as well as his work in the field, it is what was expected, so thanks wasn't needed for doing what he'd agreed to do. If he'd done an exceptional job, perhaps there would be thanks, but not for his usual job. From work we've done, do we expect to get thanked for simply doing our job? Of course it's nice to be acknowledged and encouraged, but we should just get on with our jobs. After all, we agreed to do them!

In the last verse, Jesus is even more blunt:

"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'".

To our way of thinking, that may seem way too submissive! And I'm not sure what the apostles would have made of it. But there are two things to consider here as well:

Firstly, Jesus set an example for the apostles: he served willingly, and he wanted them to serve willingly. He wanted them to be obedient to his way, his teaching.

Secondly, *the apostles* were hearing this before Jesus' death and resurrection, we read it after. The apostles are being shown a way of life to follow. But we know the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made, submitting himself to death on a cross for our sins, the ultimate servant king. Compared to the extent of servanthood Jesus was called to, any serving we do pales to almost nothing in comparison. And no matter how perfectly we serve, we are still unworthy servants compared to Jesus. There's a famous Victorian Baptist preacher called Charles Spurgeon who referred to this passage as the Lord pouring cold water down our backs, which he goes on to say is therapeutic!

There was a cold water challenge doing the rounds a few years ago where people were challenged to have a bucket of cold water, preferably with ice cubes, poured over them. If we have ever mistakenly turned the temperature setting in the shower from warm to cold, we know the shock of it, it makes us stand to attention and take in a full breath of air!

And so does this teaching of Jesus, it sharpens our focus on what servanthood is about, it is about just getting on with the job we've agreed to do, cheerfully, willingly, not expecting a thank you. Of course, if it is in your gift to acknowledge the work of another, it is always appreciated. But doing the job we've agreed to is about total commitment to faith and servanthood, for as with all our actions, as well as serving each other, "it is Christ we're serving", as it says in the song "The Servant King". That way we see what faith in action means, and that often will, yes, show us that a small amount of faith in carrying out our duties can do big things, and yes, thereby increase our faith.

Are faith and obedience two sides of the same coin? It is a privilege when we're called to serve, because it gives us a chance to be servants in the way Jesus was. We'll never reach his standard, we're all unworthy of the gift of salvation Jesus won for us by dying on the cross, but it shouldn't stop us trying to give of our very best, and doing our very best, for our servant king. Who knows what action will move mountains! Amen.

Sue Joyce, Reader