

Sermon for 2th October 2022, Year C, Trinity 16, Proper 22

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Luke 17:5-10

Sermon

To modern ears, this gospel passage is a painful, if not misleading and dangerous read. When the disciples make a simple plea to Jesus to increase their faith, he responds in a way that sounds hugely critical. “If you had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, you could command trees to be uprooted and replanted in the sea”. And if moving trees by faith seems impossible, Jesus goes even further in Matthew’s gospel and declares that faith as small as a mustard seed can move whole mountains.

It seems so mean. The disciples are humbly asking for more faith – surely a good thing – and Jesus scolds them by accusing them of having faith tinier than the tiniest seed.

No doubt most of us immediately hang our heads in shame with the disciples, suffering the rebuke we know we deserve. If there’s one thing we’ve come to expect from the gospels, it’s that the disciples – and therefore we too – are always falling short of Jesus’ expectations.

And it gets worse. Jesus goes on to remind us that we should see ourselves as worthless slaves, who must be obedient and never expect any gratitude for anything we are told to do.

Really? This doesn’t sound very healthy, psychologically speaking. Many people in society spend their whole lives enduring the opposite problem. They continually think of themselves as unworthy, useless, unwanted, unloved, or are told that by others. I don’t mind admitting that I myself first sought out

Christianity to try to escape feelings of worthlessness and shame, of failure, and of never being good enough. I wanted to become a good person – someone I could be proud of. Becoming a worthless slave was not what I had in mind!

And for women and persecuted minorities of every kind, this passage has another dangerous undertone, reinforcing the idea that they must never seek gratitude or plaudits for their work or achievements, but must only ever accept their duties as humble servants, never to be free to lead their own lives – something that society has drummed into them for centuries, if not millennia.

So, is this passage redeemable? Do we simply accept that Jesus has had an off-day and move swiftly on? Or is it possible that we may have slightly misunderstood what Jesus was trying to say? As some wit once cleverly insisted, “if you take the text out of context, you’re left with a con”.

So, let’s start with this question of faith. Is Jesus really giving the disciples a good telling off for not having enough faith?

I don’t think so. I think he might actually be encouraging them. Rather than criticising their tiny, almost-non-existent faith, my sense is that he’s reminding them how powerful the tiniest amount of faith can be. Jesus knows that human beings always prefer to rely on our own abilities, rather than trust in God, and so he’s making it very clear that even the tiniest amount of faith is way more effective than anything we can do in our own strength.

So, it's possible that Jesus is telling his followers they already have all the faith they need to do everything that God is asking of them. There is therefore no need for them to judge their own degree of faith, either relying on its strength or being anxious about its weakness.

A danger for all of us is to see faith as another personal skill we can lay claim to or worry that we don’t have enough of. But faith is always a gift, not something we can earn, or learn, or work harder to obtain.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he lists the various gifts of the Spirit: Wisdom, Knowledge, Healing, and so on. And one of these is Faith. Faith is a gift of God. It is not something we can achieve; it's something we can only ask for, and which God promises he will always give.

The disciples actually do the right thing, asking for increased faith, recognising that it is a gift, but Jesus tells them – and us – that we already have all the faith we need to do the amazing things God is asking of us as our Lord and master. Now we just need to fulfil the purpose that God has given to us as his servants – to bring love into the world.

So, this is the context we bring to Jesus' insistence that we must see ourselves as worthless slaves, with its very uncomfortable insinuation to the modern ear, that we must always be doormats, doing what we're told without expecting gratitude or any respite or rest for ourselves.

I hope we can immediately see that there is a huge difference between being a slave to another human being and being a servant to God. Jesus certainly isn't advocating a system of slaves & masters in human society, as if some of us are always destined to be in charge and the others must put up with being forever ordered around. What he does do is use that system, so prevalent in his own day, to describe the appropriate relationship between God and his people.

To an audience who are apparently used to having slaves serve at their beck and call at all hours of day and night, Jesus reminds them that they are called to be servants of God's will – to love their neighbours without expecting any selfish reward.

In other words, there's no point serving God if you're doing it just to get benefits for yourself. You can probably hear echoes of Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders who like to show off their piety in the streets, and be seen to be making generous donations in the temples. "They have already received their reward",

Jesus says. Instead, our attitude towards God must be one of humility. “We have only done what we ought to have done”.

I want to keep emphasising that Jesus isn't trying to make us feel terrible about ourselves, and he isn't trying to make us feel anxious about our tiny faith. Quite the contrary. Instead, he is trying to help us let go of all our personal anxiety about whether we are doing faith properly, and our need for personal status and recognition for our gifts and abilities that set us apart from others.

Do what I do, Jesus says. Forget yourself and place your attention entirely on God. If we have the tiniest faith in a God who created us and knows us down to the inmost parts of our being, then we must accept he is the master after all, and we are only servants.

But then, what kind of master is God? Is he the sort of master who demands that we slave all day in the fields and then come home and prepare the food for the master to eat at his leisure? No. Jesus, who always shows us what God is like, says this: “I am among you as one who serves”. And he did not call his followers ‘worthless slaves’ but called them his friends. And, in the most astonishing demonstration of servanthood, God incarnate knelt before each one of them on the night of his arrest, and washed their feet. And then, for all our sakes, our Lord went willingly to die on the cross.