

Sermon for Sunday 2 October 2022

Luke 17:5-10 – Of mustard seeds and slaves

Lord, open the ears of our hearts. That we may hear your message to us, today. Amen.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Western world, the first question that people asked was 'why'. And after a while, the question shifted to "what". What can we do? What can we do to help?

The British government asked for volunteers to help the National Health Service with all the extra urgent non-specialist tasks. Half a million people signed up almost immediately, so many that it was hard to find appropriate tasks for all of them. Retired doctors and nurses came back to the front line. Some caught the virus themselves and died.

Scholar Tom Wright highlights that they were doing what the early Christians did in times of plague. In the first few centuries of our era, when serious sickness would strike a town or city, the well-to-do would run for the hills, literally, because part of the problem was that towns had low-lying, foetid air. The Christians would stay and nurse people. Sometimes they caught the disease and died. People were

astonished. What was that about? Oh, they replied, we are followers of this man Jesus. He put his life on the line to save us. So that's what we do as well.

Nobody had ever thought of doing that kind of thing before. No wonder the Gospel spread. Even when the Romans were doing their best to stamp it out. The fascinating thing, explains Tom Wright, is that much of the world then picked up the hint. And today, much of what we take for granted in social attitudes comes from Christian innovation. Christians picked up their rule of life from the Jews, through Jesus of course. They took it from Jesus that there was One God who had a special concern for the poor, the sick, the outcast, the slaves. And so they acted on faith. They did acts of faith.

And the disciples were the first to realise that in the new order of things, where the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the little ones mattered the most to God, faith was going to be precious, because the task was immense. And the obstacles, many.

Think about it. First, there's the people who trip each other up, people who do things that cause others to stumble, people who test your faith, or deliberately cause harm, who are selfish and never think of the consequences. They need forgiving. You need faith for that. A lot of it. And what about the call for repeated forgiveness? 'Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, you must forgive them!' says Jesus.

And that forgiveness requires faith, but not just faith in the sense of trust, but faithfulness to God through Christ. And that faithfulness is humble. For Jesus, when you forgive someone, you make yourself their servant, not their master. If you make yourself their master, you take the moral high ground: I haven't done anything wrong, so if I choose to forgive you that makes me superior to you. No, that's not the Christian way. The Christian way is the way of humility. For Jesus, we are to be humble, to take no advantage of a situation, to give the other person the generous and welcoming forgiveness that God has shown us in the first place. That, after all, is the real source of humility.

No wonder then, that the disciples realize in verse 5 that all this will require more faith than they think they have. Jesus is quick to respond: it's not great faith you need, it is faith in a great God. For Jesus, faith is like a window through which you can see something. It does not matter how large the window is. What matters is the God you see through your faith window. You're looking at the creator God, God active in Jesus and the Spirit. Even a tiny window will do, as tiny as a mustard seed, it gives you access to a greatness you cannot even imagine... However...

God's greatness is not for us to use as we wish, and that's the final lesson that Jesus teaches his disciples in our Gospel passage today. He says: 'will the master thank the servant

because he did what he was told to do? So it goes with you, you have only done your duty.' It is easy to think 'I've done all this, I've worked so hard, surely God will be satisfied with that?' But the minute we do that, we close our little faith window on our great God, we forget who this God really was. We can never put God in our debt.

The fact is that all genuine service to God is done from gratitude, not to earn anything at all. Worthiness is not the issue. The issue is trust and surrender. As Thérèse de Lisieux understood, Jesus does not demand great actions from us, but simply surrender and gratitude. Let's not even go down the road of worthiness. We're all saved by grace. We're all being loved in spite of ourselves. Worthiness for Jesus, God incarnate, has nothing to do with us, but everything to do with his goodness. We are enough just as we are, and we are worthy of love and belonging.

And our response is acts of faith, works from gratitude. And we back to the early Christians in the times of plague, working tirelessly for the good of society, building the kingdom brick by brick, because, like they said, we are followers of this man Jesus. He put his life on the line to save us. So that's what we do as well.

Let us pray the prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;
to give, and not to count the cost,
to fight, and not to heed the wounds,
to toil, and not to seek for rest,
to labour, and not to ask for reward,
except that of knowing that we are doing your will.

Amen