

A Grain of Faith

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron
at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on 2 October 2022.

The readings were: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10



Sometimes Luke's Gospel is hard to understand. Two weeks ago we had the parable of the dishonest manager, the one who is unaccountably commended for cheating his employer out of a good percentage of his income. Now we have this saying about slaves being "worthless," not merely not deserving any special reward for doing the job that's expected of them. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep ... Come here at once and take your place at the table?" Well, we might think, didn't Jesus himself talk about inviting all manner of poor people to a wedding feast? And didn't Jesus gird himself with a towel and wash his disciples' feet at the last supper? So why is he saying now that it would be outlandish for a master to serve his servants? And what has this to do anyway with having faith the size of a mustard seed?

I think the clue to the interpretation of these gospel verses lies in the emphasis on faith in all three of our readings: the faith of the prophet Habbakuk in the eventual appearance of God, despite God's apparent absence; Paul's farewell statement to

Timothy of his faith in the grace of God as his life drew to a close; the disciples' request that their feeble faith be increased. And faith that God is in control of all things and the world is ordered as God would have it. Jesus assures his followers that God will work through them powerfully as faithful individuals simply doing what is expected of them – as "worthless slaves", nobody special. A few chapters earlier, Luke gives us Jesus's saying that faith the size of a tiny grain of mustard seed will grow into a tree large enough for birds to build their nests in (13:19). Now that same grain of faith can uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea, for the power of God in the lives of ordinary people can change a reality that is often harsh, disappointing, challenging. As Christians, a tiny amount of faith is all we need to lead steadfast and useful lives, be an answer to prayer for those in need, bring our own needs before God in the determined hope that they will be met by the infinite love and mercy of God. Jesus tells his disciples that their role is to let that miniscule amount of faith take root in them, do what is expected of them and let God do the rest.

There is another emphasis in our readings today and that is the proclamation of our faith. We must not merely claim but proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ. "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it," the Lord says to Habakkuk. And Paul reminds his hearers, "For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (2 Tim. 1:11). This morning we'll be singing the hymn, "We have a gospel to proclaim,"





for that is what our relationship with Jesus demands that we do in this world; giving him the glory and the honour and doing what is merely expected of us as his servants in our lives of witness. We are to proclaim that Jesus Christ brings light into our places of deepest darkness. Our opening hymn (“Thou whose almighty word”) reminded us that God alone can bring order and light into a world of chaos and darkness, and we are to hold on to this faith despite the fact that God may often seem deaf to our pleas, as was the situation of the prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk lived in Jerusalem about 600 BC and feared for the future of his nation at a time when the people were feeling very threatened. We have a similar situation before our very eyes in Europe today, in the plight of Ukraine, which is in the process of being carved up by its aggressive neighbour. Jerusalem watched Babylon prepare to invade; Habakkuk cried to God for help but none seemed to come. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help?” This is a classic complaint in the Old Testament. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” cries the Psalmist (Ps.13:1). Also, there’s the question, “Why?” “Why do you let me see these things, God: the injustice and violence in the world, all the things I am powerless to do anything about?” It’s very easy to identify with this classic lament, not only when we contemplate the violence and destruction in Ukraine, but also the poverty and political ineptitude here at home. Like Habakkuk, we feel helpless and angry in the face of injustice and God often seems distant and indifferent or, at best, very slow to act. But despite everything, Habakkuk declares – sounding very like Job in the midst of his sufferings – “I will stand at my watch-

post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.” This is a faith that is rock-solid, that will not be moved despite the silence of God. Habakkuk stands at his post, ever the faithful servant, waiting for God to intervene. Then suddenly there is a reply, and God tells Habakkuk that his vision is limited – he isn’t seeing the whole picture. The tyrants who seem to be in control aren’t really; the prophet needs to look more closely at the controllers and see that things are not exactly right with them. He needs to see the big picture, not just what is happening in his own narrow field of vision.

Habakkuk is commanded to write this message on a hoarding big enough so that even someone running past it can read it. The proclamation is to be patient and to wait for God to act, a God who is never deaf to a cry for help, although no precise time can be expected for this to be fulfilled. And how familiar is this? So often we ask God for something desperately important to us, certain that it must happen now; we ask again and again because we want an answer right away. But prayer is answered in God’s time, not in ours, and astonishingly enough, when we view the scenario retrospectively, we can see that our heartfelt, genuine prayer has been answered if not exactly to the letter, at least in the way that is best for us. This is the life of faith and patient faithfulness that we are called to. This is where we live in this world, frequently abhorring injustice and violence, taking action as best we can, but knowing that ultimately we’re dependent on the intervention of God to put things right. The book of Habakkuk ends with one of the most poetic and also one of the most poignant statements of faith in Scripture:





Though the fig tree does not blossom, and
no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and
the fields yield no food:
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in
the God of my salvation. (3:17-18)

We need this reassurance constantly; we
need abundant faith to carry us through
times of trouble, scarcity and want.

It's thought that Paul wrote his second
letter to Timothy as his life drew to a
close, or that it was written in his name by
someone else after his death. Whichever
of these is true, the letter urges Timothy
to hold on to what he has received, that
gift of faith, for it is central to his identity.
God has called him to serve not because of
anything he has done, but because of who
he is, "according to his own purpose and
grace."

Whoever we are, the ordinary, faithful
followers of Christ, each one of us is very
important to God. Luke reminds us that we
can be effective as Christians wherever we
find ourselves in life, whatever our status
or occupation. All we need is a tiny amount
of that great gift of faith that our Father in
heaven is in control of all things. Amen.