

27th Sunday Year C

Fr Jarred Mercer

Habakkuk 1.2-3; 2.2-4

Psalm 95

Timothy 1.6-8, 13-14

Luke 17.5-10

Faith is a tricky concept for us. We hear about people's faith as a system of beliefs: Christianity or Islam or Judaism, for example. Faith interest groups vie for political agendas, and people speak of having faith in one another, or even oneself, in order to accomplish something.

Much of this has a legitimate place in our language about faith. But our Gospel passage this morning speaks of faith in quite a different way.

Jesus has told his disciples that they will be held responsible if they cause someone younger or weaker

in their faith to stumble, and then says they must forgive incessantly those who sin against them.

The disciples respond to what seems to them very difficult teachings by pleading with Jesus: 'increase our faith'. The faith they seek is not a system of belief or a sort of confidence in someone else or in themselves, but rather somehow the source of a life that transforms their relations with others, that enables a life of mercy, humility, and grace.

Christ's response to their request is a bit odd, as is his usual custom, and quite frankly a bit discouraging: if you had faith even the size of a mustard seed, clearly implying that they do not, then you could say to a mulberry tree be cast into the sea and it would happen.

It seems that Christ might be, at best, entertaining the self-indulgent, disney-film sort of faith that inflates our sense of ego—just believe, and you can do anything!,—and at worst, the charlatan faith of the

televangelist: just have a little faith, send in your money and, if you believe, your credit card debt, or cancer, or depression will just melt away. But these are completely contrary to the faith Jesus is teaching.

Faith, indeed, all of life, is always within the confines of our limitations, our vulnerability. Our faith, our reaching out for a reality beyond ourselves, our forward moving hope, is a sort of built in mechanism that removes us from our narcissistic navel gazing. It de-centres our selves and relativises our life in relation to other things, or other people, or another being: Faith necessitates that I am no longer the central character in my story, I am no longer the object in focus, my gaze has been turned to something or someone else.

Even when we behave as if we were in control and self-sufficient, as perhaps we do most of the time, we are all radically dependent upon other people and things and forces beyond our control at every step.

Our human limits cannot be overcome: you are never going to uproot a mulberry tree and throw it into the sea, as if faith were some sort of Jedi mind power! The point of Jesus' teaching on faith is not to affirm your sense of self-sufficiency, as if you can *possess* something called 'faith' that will remove your human limitations and make you a self-sufficient god in yourself.

No, faith is not something we *possess* it is primarily something we are possessed *by*. The whole point of faith is a de-centring of the self, a removal of our narcissism and recognition of the depth of our need—not to shift us into control, not to aid us in our insatiable lust to overcome the limitations that restrict our power.

The misunderstanding of faith as something possessed which in turn enables us to be in control, to possess other things, or even other people—the faith of religious power games, the faith of the Pharisees, perhaps—is the opposite of the kind of

faith Jesus teaches us, the kind of faith Jesus *shows* us in his human life—that faith he inhabits as the truest expression of our humanity.

Faith can only be recognised in powerlessness—in letting go of the self and turning our gaze towards another, towards the author of our faith, the one who makes it perfect, indeed, who lived it perfectly.

If faith is surrender, a laying down of one's life, a de-centring of oneself so that we can be on offer as gift, possessed, by another, then it is in the humility of the incarnation and cross of Jesus that this faith most clearly takes shape in our world. What I am saying is that our faith is not only *in* the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it *is* the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is faith that makes possible what is impossible in ourselves: whether it is a relentless mercy and forgiveness that finds no end, or throwing a tree into an ocean. The point is, both are impossible. But in

Christ the impossible becomes our every day reality—he is inaugurating a new world. Even in the midst of becoming the victim of all human hatred and sin, you'll remember, his mercy knows no bounds: 'Father forgive', he cried, 'Father, forgive'.

Just following our passage, Jesus gives an example of faith for us to follow. Jesus heals ten lepers are healed but only one, a Samaritan, returns to show his gratitude. This person was a double outsider: a foreign Samaritan, whom Jesus as a Jew should not have even been talking to, and, even more marginalising, a leper, who had to live a life of seclusion from the rest of society, and even yell loudly to make himself known if someone was coming near. He is the ultimate untouchable.

Your faith has made you well, Christ tells him. The mustard-seed sized faith enables a life of mercy. And Jesus says this is really not extraordinary at all—a slave does not expect recognition for doing what is required of him by his master, he says, and so we

cannot act as though God owes us something if we live in mercy: this is the bare minimum. We don't deserve any points, in other words, for putting some tins in a box in the back today for Harves—that's just sort of being a decent human being! And so forgiveness is just innate to the Christian.

Samaritan-leper-sized faith, however, rewrites human history, or at least a new future. It is the faith of surrender, the faith that relinquishes control, the faith that doesn't have a sense of entitlement to anything, but simply turns its gaze on its healer; a faith that moves away from self and realises its own limitations and need. It is the faith of pure thanksgiving—it is *eucharistic* faith.

The leper's faith transforms the social order entirely: A Samaritan leper, saved, brought into the community, healed and accepted. This faith transforms the entire working order of our world.

And this is the faith to which we are called. And as a result of it, our life becomes pure thanksgiving, pure Eucharist.

And this means our talents and abilities and passions aren't used only for our own personal progress or advancement, vying for position and stature, security and promotion. It means that we can't spend money on wine or entertainment virtually without limit and drop pocket change in the offering on Sunday while the church operates at a cash deficit every month. It means that none of our stomachs can settle when shelters are being closed in our city and more people are turned out on the streets.

When those who are meant to enforce justice in our world forsake their responsibilities, when nations abandon the oppressed and vulnerable literally by the boat-load, when systems and structures in our society are weighted against the poor, we have to wake up! We have to come alive and give of our time, give of our talents, give our money, and stop winging

in our narcissistic individualism about what is 'ours',
making possession and consumption primary to
generosity and love: That is not Faith! Faith is the
opposite of possession.

Our prayer must join with Habakkuk in compassion:
'How long, O Lord, how long'. And then, as the
healed Samaritan lepers that we are, we must
become part of the answer ourselves, with faith that
writes a new human future.