

Faith of a Mustard Seed - Reflection

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Luke 17: 5-19

Turn to the person next to you and tell them (briefly) why do you come to church?

And if your answer to that is something like "to get closer to God," then why do you want to do that?

At Synod this year I was having a conversation on a table where someone said they felt they did not know how to share their faith. I asked them those two questions and, after they had replied, pointed out they had very simply shared their faith. So congratulations, you can all do that!

The Gospel reading we heard today includes last week's reading (and a bit more) because it develops the same theme: exploring the concept of faith. Essentially, we get this theme in two parts: first there is some teaching, then the practical example.

In our modern world, the concept of faith is conflated with belief. All too often I talk to people who have been turned off the church because they see people who might have the right intellectual ideas, but demonstrate behaviours that is at odds with what we read about Jesus doing in his time. Essentially what is being seen is people conflating faith with belief, people thinking that because they subscribe to the "right" ideas, they have been "saved."

This conflation of belief and faith occurred during the Reformation. Suddenly beliefs, such as whether or not the pope was the head of the church and if the Communion elements were turned into the literal body and blood of Christ, became not just important – the wrong answer could get a person killed. The ideas became emphasised, and this conflation began.

So, what was faith before these two concepts became confused. Faith was (and still is) a way of life. It changes us, shapes us, and if we are living by faith then it means we are listening to the Good News (Gospel) and applying it into our context. It is more than simply ticking off a particular prayer or assenting to a particular creed. Faith is lived out.

I think this idea is what Jesus is trying to say to his disciples in the parable. The disciples think that faith can be quantified, and hence "increased." In response, Jesus gives his typical over the top response – if you have the faith the size of a mustard seed... It's a rather ridiculous image that is so clearly not meant to be taken literally. To make this point, and provide an understanding of what faith looks like, we hear the story of 10 lepers.

These ten lepers are living on the edges of society, quite literally. Rejected by their communities who are attempting to live by the Torah, they are pushed into a liminal space that is neither Jew nor Samaritan. In reality, there is no region between Galilee and Samaria, so this framing is used to emphasise the other-ness of these people. Despite this, they have heard about Jesus and can recognise him.

So, as we know they ask for help and get sent off to the priests. Imagine the surprise then, for the first audience, when they hear the one who is praised is the one who only starts to

obey. There are so many legitimate reasons why the other nine had not returned. They were doing what Jesus told them to do. Being good Jews they needed to be made "clean" by a priest before they could approach another person. The Samaritan did not have the same investment in going to the priests because he was from a different religion. In all likelihood, the priests were in Jerusalem, a journey of several days, so they had not had the chance to live out their faith and do what is needed. So many good reasons for this outcome and Jesus (and the author) would have understood this.

However, for this Samaritan faith was something beyond fulfilling just keeping the Torah. It was responding to the situation in which he found himself and responding appropriately. Faith was something to be lived out and he did this by returning to give thanks rather than continuing on a journey that he did not need to undertake (except that he was told to do that). The disobedient one is praised for faith!

And so, let us take the time to reflect on what it means for us today to live out our faith in our context? In what ways does this idea of faith as a way of life challenge and/or affirm us? What is God asking you to take away today?