

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

A Tiny Amount of Faith

The apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. But in his answer Jesus revealed that they were not thinking as wisely as they might about what it means to be a person of faith.

The apostles' model of faith seems to have been based on a sliding scale. In their view you could have a small, medium or large amount of faith, with all possible gradations in between. Jesus' response suggests that he had a different model. For him, a very small amount to real faith was quite enough to work miracles.

It's never been clear to me whether Jesus was putting his disciples down with this reply or seeking to build them up. The most obvious reading is that because sycamine trees (mulberry trees in more recent translations) were not being uprooted and thrown into the sea at the whim by Peter, James, John and company that they didn't even have a mustard seed's worth of faith. A more encouraging reading might be that as disciples they had already taken a step in the direction of true faith and it wouldn't be long before they were empowered to make things happen - for which the tree being caused to uproot itself and cast itself into the sea was an absurdly hyperbolic example.

But maybe there's a third reading, which is that Jesus gave a ridiculous answer in order to expose the absurdity of the question. 'More faith? What do you mean, more faith? And what would you do if you have this "more faith"? (this is my imaginary Jesus talking). 'I suggest you get used to having the amount of faith you have, of being the person you are, and let

God get on with the big stuff. You can be of help here and there, but at the end of the day, and I'm sorry to put it like this but it's true, you apostles manage to combine real stupidity with astonishing vanity and ambition and so you are ' - and now I go back to the actual words of Jesus according to Luke, ' you are unprofitable servants'. All you have done is 'that which it was your duty to do'.

Strong words indeed. Jesus must have thought that his followers were made of resilient material. But such an interpretation overcomes the distinction between putting down and building up that I made earlier. It is in fact a lesson in real humility. That is, of understanding your place in the divine scheme of things. We are not, any of us, 'big shots' we are 'bit players'.

Which is perhaps just as well when you cast your eye around the world today and begin to take on board just how many things are not as they should be. Our first lesson was from the prophet Habakkuk who surveyed the world of his time - about 600BC and became deeply disconcerted for two reasons. First he could see how bad everything was around him

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgement comes forth perverted.

But bad as this was, Habakkuk did not at all like the look of God's response to it, which was that God's people would be overrun by the far greater nation of Babylon who would deal very roughly indeed with the people. The only good news is that it would not go on for ever

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Habakkuk didn't ask to be given more faith, what he sought was vision. The vision he was granted was grim, but it was realistic and things were for a time terrible for the people. But the bad days did eventually come to an end.

Unfortunately if you were looking for places where the prophetic voice of Habakkuk would sound about right today you would be spoiled for choice. The most obvious parallel might be Hong Kong, where the fear of overthrow of freedom and democracy by a mighty power nearby is real, but where it is also the case that people look around and say, 'really we can't carry on like this and expect it to end well'.

Fear of powerful neighbours has always been a significant dynamic in international relations, but also impacts on our domestic and civic life. The question of how to control forces that are more powerful than we are is one at which the human race has specialised for long time, taming animals, find ways to survive storms at sea, creating and using explosives, harnessing the power of steam, wind, wave and atom. Dealing with forces bigger than we are is what humans do. Nonetheless it is reasonable that we

should do it with some trepidation, because if these things go wrong then a lot of people will be hurt.

One factor that makes life different for human beings today, however, is the amount of information we have. Habakkuk would have not been nearly as well informed as we are about national and international affairs, and yet we are so overwhelmed by information that we do all sorts of things deliberately and not so deliberately to limit what we hear or learn. But no one in today's world can look to the future and say that, all things considered, things are on the up and up. Chances are the combination of climate change, political instability and increased population are going to mean that life for many people will become more and more uncomfortable in the years to come.

What then does it mean to be person of faith today? First is that to be a person of faith is to be person of facts. Mature faith is not life in a fantasy world but a response to the real world. Habakkuk and Jesus are of one mind about that. Second, to be a person of faith is not to be person of facile optimism or fantastical escapism. Rather, to be person of faith is to be a person of hope. We may not be able to imagine that things will work out well, but the Christian faith is that somehow, and one day, they will. That may not sound like much of an answer. Maybe it sounds like 'not much faith', but the today's gospel message is that even a tiny amount of faith can make a huge amount of difference.

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Habakkuk 1.1-4, 2.1-4; Luke 17.5-10*