Morning services Trinity 16

**Habakkuk 1.1-4,2.1-4**

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.   
O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you ‘Violence!’and you will not save?   
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?  
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.

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.   
Then the Lord answered me and said: 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.

**2 Timothy 1.1-14**

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

**Luke 17.5-10**

The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.

‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” ’

Some years ago, I worked on the restoration of a National Trust garden down near Rainham Marshes. One of the highlights of this garden is an ancient mulberry tree, which over the years has cracked and twisted and re-rooted and spread-eagled itself over the ground so that it now looks a bit like a leafy octopus, with limbs stretching in all directions. It must be about 40 feet across, and still produces the most mouth-watering fruit. In a garden which was then neglected and abandoned, it seemed like a symbol of tenacity and regeneration.

When Jesus, in today’s gospel reading, says that faith the size of a mustard seed is enough to uproot a mulberry tree, he’s expecting his hearers to be taken aback. It’s an absurd image: that a seed the size of a pin-head could have power to move a mighty mature tree. It addresses head-on a question that I think might lurk in a lot of our minds: does faith have any real impact on our lives today?

It’s easy to hear Jesus in this passage sounding somewhat exasperated. The disciples ask him to increase their faith: a request you’d have thought he might have welcomed. Instead, he apparently bats them away: If you had any faith at all you’d be able to work miracles. And why are you asking anyway – you’re only worthless slaves! But this understanding sits very awkwardly with other sayings of Jesus recorded by Luke, where he describes his followers as members of his family. In chapter 8 Jesus says that those who put God’s word into practice are mother and brothers to him. And in chapter 11 he tells the disciples to “ask, and you will receive”; “If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Viewed in that context, I think today’s gospel could be understood as an encouragement. You may think your faith is insufficient, but that’s to misunderstand its power. A tiny grain is enough to do unimaginable things: to shift the apparently unmoveable. And the reason for that is that faith is not something we do; instead it’s a way of tapping into the power of God – the creative force that produced our universe and sustains its life; the longing for connectedness and wholeness that reaches out to and through each one of us.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests that faith is not primarily about being able to sign up to a whole raft of church doctrines. We may be perplexed, or uncertain, or unconvinced, about all manner of things: it doesn’t mean we are not part of the family of God. Rather, he describes faith as a dependable relationship. In the face of confusion, loss, disillusionment about ourselves and our world, faith is a recognition that God accepts and welcomes us unswervingly. The message of the gospels is that God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, to rescue those who have lost their way. Faith is not a measure of how many impossible things we can believe: it’s a willingness to entertain the idea that God cares about us, and then to act as if that were true.

In starting on this path, one of the first things we will recognise is how little we have to offer. We are each unique and precious in God’s sight, yet frustratingly limited in what we can achieve by our own efforts. The barriers we face to living a better, truer life can seem as deep-rooted as a mulberry tree. St Paul’s letter to the Romans puts it pithily: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” In today’s gospel reading, when the disciples ask for more faith, they are responding to Jesus telling them that they must forgive each other – seven times a day if necessary. Now I would say that’s a big ask! (I’m fairly sure I would be more than irritated if someone did seven bad things to me in one day.) The disciples seem to agree: “We can’t do this – help us out!” But Jesus’ reply points them to the potential hidden in a seed so insignificant they might not even have seen it. The seed represents their dawning sense that God accepts them with all their faults and calls them to live as his children. The power to change is from God.

In our epistle reading St Paul encourages Timothy to remember “the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace”. But he also reminds Timothy to “guard the good treasure entrusted to you”. There is an echo here of the story we know as the parable of the talents, where stewards are entrusted with cash to look after while their master is away. When he returns, he rewards those who have put his money to work to generate more income. The faith that we have, however frail and faltering, is there to be used. The seed has to be planted and watered if it is to bear fruit.

Suppose we take the challenge and try to act on our sense of God’s invitation to us: what then? Well, we very soon become aware that it’s not a route to easy success. The Bible is fairly unflinching in its message that bad things happen to good people. Our first reading from Habakkuk provides just one example. Whether it’s national catastrophe or personal tragedy, we cannot escape the pain of living. Sometimes that might be a direct result of the call of faith: Paul calls himself a prisoner of the Lord, suffering for the gospel. Sometimes it just seems as if circumstances are stacked against us. If we start from the assumption that success and prosperity are the natural order of things, it’s easy to play the blame game when things go wrong. Whether we point the finger at others or ourselves, that’s rarely a constructive outlook. Jesus’ apparently harsh words to his disciples, pointing out that slaves don’t expect a reward for doing their duty, may be paradoxically helpful here. Human lives inevitably involve hard work and suffering. A life which aims to build a relationship with God can’t ignore the painful death which God himself suffered on our behalf. But even the slaves are told that “later you may eat and drink”. It’s not in their owner’s interest to starve them to death! As with that earlier image of fathers feeding their children, though, I don’t think we should see this as a true reflection of God’s provision for us. “How much more will your Father in heaven give to those who ask him?”

In John’s gospel Jesus says to his disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer… but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” This is the beginning of the relationship that Rowan Williams speaks of, our invitation to be God’s friends. To build that friendship we need to reflect on our understanding of God, as revealed in the Bible, and in the truth that speaks to our own hearts – what St Paul calls “the Holy Spirit living in us”. And then we have to act on it. If we want our faith to grow so that it can uproot the tenacious tentacles of our own selfishness, resentment and stubbornness, we have to make the choice to follow its promptings. So I’ll end with a question, for myself as much as anyone: If I were to put my trust in what I know of God, how would that change the way I act today?

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