

Church of All Nations
October 5, 2025

Luke 17:5-10

Who among us has not at some time prayed, screamed or pleaded, "Increase my faith"?

Maybe it is simply the cry wrenched from the heart (or is it the gut) Dear God, I am going under, it is all too hard, too much for me, give me more of whatever it takes to get through this day.

Actually I misquoted in my opening line. It is "increase our faith" the disciples, church, the Christian community speaking here. And your individual personal faith takes its place and participates within that larger setting.

The word "faith" can mean many things in bible and church talk. We sometimes say talk about the "Christian faith", meaning something like all the practices, traditions, doctrines etc that are associated with the Christian religion (or other religion). ("the faith").

Sometimes people use the word faith in distinction to what they imagine is a rational and scientific mindset.

Believing something despite any evidence. But it is likely when we hear the expression that features in today's gospel reading, "Increase our faith" we think of something far more closer to home and personal, "our faith" – includes my personal belief and relationship with God. Lord, increase that.

We are reading from Luke's gospel (year C for the liturgical incrowd). One of the things I find compelling about Luke's account of Jesus and discipleship is that this gospel has such an extraordinary breadth. What I mean is Luke has both the most mentions of joy and some of the most challenging sayings of Jesus about what the cost is to follow him. How do you make sense of that? So while today's reading can sound a bit harsh and dismissive keep in mind there is also much joy and exuberance and Holy Spirit in Luke's gospel. We often struggle to hold both in the same tension that Luke's gospel holds them. But in that tension is found the life of discipleship.

Luke's Gospel sometimes presents discipleship as that thing that is its own reward. There is precious little about it that brings tangible rewards or status or security. Its just about being in the company of Jesus and fellow seekers of the Kingdom. But how hard that can be. The would-be disciples of Luke 9:57-62 all seem prepared to follow Jesus. Yet Jesus counsels them and warns them, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head". Yeah,

discipleship is hard stuff. A man wants to care for his father, another wants to say goodbye to his family, but the urgency of discipleship leaves no room for such common expressions of devotion. If one wants to be a disciple, Jesus suggests that one count the cost (14:25-34). The investment is great (like building a tower) and risky (like going to war). You would better consider the sacrifice; after all, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (14:33). And there is hard teaching about the need to forgive not once, but seven times in a single day— and who wants to do that?

I think some of this is behind the disciples request of Jesus. They had been hearing some pretty tough talk from Jesus who seems to be going out of his way to **not** make this discipleship stuff not only not soft and fluffy but barely possible. He makes it abundantly clear to his disciples that if you want to be included in the band of my followers you are going to have to be mightly serious about all this faith and discipleship stuff.

In that light it is no wonder that the apostles desire greater faith (17:5). But even then, when they throw themselves upon his mercy Jesus does not sound like he is applauding the disciples. It does not sound like he is commending them, "Fantastic, you have at last got to that point where you realise an increase in faith is really the only thing worth seeking in this life. " "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed," suggests that the apostles lack even such minimal faith. In other words, Jesus not only declines the apostles' request, he seems to be piling criticism on top of it.

Two parts of Jesus response. First, the much more palatable saying about faith only needing to be the size of a mustard seed. And the second part, that we don't like and don't quote about even when you have done your faithful part you have only done what was required and expected of you. Grumpy Jesus.

But are the disciples thinking of it as some commodity, even if precious, as if some precious metal or fragrance, or threads of saffron.

But Jesus does not seem to have bought into that way of thinking of faith. Not judging by his response to the request anyway.

The apostles are asking for more -- more insight, more understanding, more depth of belief. But Jesus' first comment pushes his followers in a different direction: if you had any faith at all you could do impossible things -- so it's not that you need more faith, you need *any faith*. *or to exercise the tiny mustard seed of faith you do have.*

Faith is not something we "have" like a lump of something, even if something precious. Don't think size, because then faith would run the risk of attracting attention to itself, "See look how big I am". Here we can truly say regarding faith, "Size does not matter". Faith in the way Jesus is talking about it, wants all the focus to be, not in the size of faith, but the one in whom the faith is directed – that is God. And because God is the all loving, gracious, dynamic power behind the universe – it matters not a jot how big your faith is, only that you have some connection. That is all that matters. I sometimes get frustrated when I am trying to go online and get the message, "You are off line, limited or no connectivity". "Unstable connection while on

Zoom. Doesn't much matter at that time how expensive or how many add on bits or memory are in my computer there is no connection.

Jesus I think is being a bit ironic/satirical here. More faith! He exclaims, gees you could already blow your brains out with what you have and you do not yet even realise that and you want to go hankering after more.

Now the language of slave and slave owner can be certainly problematic for us and there are some who have spent much of their life struggling with issues of self esteem and being treated by others as only existing for their pleasure and those people don't need to hear again they are worthless slaves.

the second part of the gospel reading which has Jesus saying something like, You are to be faithful in what you do, but there will be no special reward. You are just doing what you are supposed to be doing, so don't think that a greater understanding of what faithful service is about will get you greater reward. We feel a bit uncomfortable with this language of slaves and slave-owners in relation to God and faith; and it does throw up an obstacle for us to overcome. The image is drawn from a world and a practice we no longer find tolerable. But I think we can understand the sentiment of Jesus drawing on other relationships and images.

If uncomfortable with slave/master illustration Jesus uses try this one. It lacks the element of compulsion and hierarchical relations from the world of slavery but picks up the element of duty and . At half time at the recent AFL grand final scores were tied. I said to person next to me – jocularly – we might be in for a draw and we discussed how things have changed from when there used to be a rematch. Now it is extra time and my imagination went to the players who would have ran themselves absolutely to the end, nothing left at the end of the game, you don't want to come off the ground after an AFL grand final without feeling you have given your all. So imagine collapsing on the ground with exhaustion but not to hear the words "Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the rest prepared for you" they had to front up again after a 10 minute rest and and do it all again. Could they give their all again? I could well imagine the coaches of both teams declaring, "Of course they can. I would expect nothing less. After all they were Geelong/Brisbane Lions players in a Grand Final, what else would they do?".

Or if AFL players in a Grand Final is too rarefied atmosphere for you to relate to, think rubbish collectors.

I got my rubbish taken away again last Friday morning, in the early hours. Nice thing to have done; don't know what I would be doing with my rubbish if I did not have this arrangement with the garbage man. But I have never thanked him; can't recollect even having seen him cos he does it really early. Come to think of it I have never thanked the people who provide electricity or water, or the internet or the phone or the newspaper. I pay them mind you, but I have I guess just always had the attitude, yeah, well thats their job, that is what they get paid to do.

Faith not as done for merit badges, but faith as acted out for the joy of it, knowing whom it is we serve. To make faith quantitative is to make it a parable of our wealth before the world, but it is instead qualitative, and a parable of our poverty and the nakedness of our service before God.

But remember that it is a dangerous thing to ask Jesus for, this increase in faith, you may just get it and what would that mean? Careful what you pray for, you may just get it. What hitherto unsuspected challenges and adventures, joys and sorrows come the way of the person with bountiful faith.