

Year C, Harvest Festival, 2nd October 2022

This week we are celebrating our Harvest Festival, the time of year when we traditionally give thanks for the end of the harvest season, not that it has been an especially easy harvest this year, particularly, apparently, for the potato growers, because of the weather patterns we have had.

Still, some things have been thriving. Some 10 years ago Neville told of the story of Johnny Appleseed, an eccentric American who myth has it went around planting apple seeds here, there and everywhere, all the while evangelising. And so Neville and the children planted an apple seed in the garden, which has now grown into a tree with a good harvest.

Nevertheless, it's hard this particular Sunday here in St Mungo's not also to think of Jesus' earlier comment to the disciples in Luke 10, and echoed in Matthew 9, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

So perhaps it's not surprising that our Gospel reading starts with the plea of the disciples for more faith. That seems quite reasonable, especially in the light of the previous four verses right at the start of this chapter when Jesus says it would be better for them to have a millstone put round their necks and be thrown into the sea than to trip up one of the little ones.

And by little ones, Jesus wasn't just referring to children, but to everyone marginalised by the rules and customs of his day, which would include the sick and disabled, who were

excluded from the temple and therefore from being reconciled with God. But that warning applies to all of us, we must make every effort to ensure that our behaviour doesn't make people feel excluded or that they want nothing to do with God at all.

So, a good dose of humility for us is perhaps the order of the day – but not the sort of humility that leads to the claim that we have achieved humility. The book *Humility and How I Achieved It* is not quite what it seems. It is in fact a book of 5,000 quotations all relating to the Fruit of the Spirit, in other words love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The author (who incidentally says he has not achieved humility) says these attributes are best the route to humility that he has come across.

And then Jesus says if your brother or sister sins seven times against you in a day and repents every time you must forgive them every time. That's hard work, isn't it, that needs a lot of faith would be our first instinct. Yet if that is what we think, then we're missing the point, according to Tom Wright. Because the point is we are to show others the same welcoming forgiveness that God has shown us. And, surely, we hope and believe that God's grace and love means it is not hard for him to forgive us. As we reflect on God's grace towards us, that too should point us towards the need for humility.

So, Jesus' answer seems very harsh. You only need a tiny bit of faith to do the impossible, he says. Like any good Jewish

rabbi of that era, Jesus uses hyperbole so that particular illustration shouldn't be taken literally, but the principle should be.

After all, how can you measure faith? You can't say I've got 25 percent greater faith than a year ago, or 25 percent less faith. Faith isn't quantifiable like that. It is all about trust, at its heart it is relational. And yet, I doubt if there is anyone here, or indeed any Christian, who hasn't at one time another prayed for more faith.

Can we blame the disciples? Asking for more faith seems an honourable thing to do, at least it's not asking for more wealth, or position, or power.

But the point is, as Tom Wright and other commentators put it, we don't need greater faith for ourselves, we just need faith in a great God, because that is what we have, a great God who can do great things if we can just get out of the way. The size of our window of faith doesn't matter, it's the God we look at through the window who matters

And then Jesus seems to double down, by saying why should you be thanked for just doing what you were supposed to do. It doesn't help of course that Jesus uses a slave-master analogy to make his point, something that is anathema to 21st ears, let alone describing the slaves as worthless in some translations. Some other translations use the word unworthy, which is at least easier to identify with because we're all unworthy, whether slave or noble.

Equally importantly, Jesus' words remind us that there is nothing, literally nothing, any of us can do to put God in our debt. And if realising that we are the ones permanently in God's debt doesn't humble us then nothing will. And if we are in a fully trusting relationship with God, then it's natural to want to do his will without praise or thanks in return

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn't seem very likeable in these few verses, but perhaps that very fact forces us to think very hard about what he is really getting at.

As I said earlier, most of us have almost certainly prayed for more faith at one point or another. But what were we asking for? Was it for the faith that results in miracles, was it for greater faith so we can understand complicated bits of doctrine more easily, was it to help us cope with our anxiety and fears, or was it so that we might feel happier or holier?

Perhaps the faith Jesus is looking for doesn't relate to any of those things, in which case his 'no' makes a bit more sense. What if more faith isn't the same thing as better faith? What if faith is something we do, not something we have?

Throughout the Gospels we can see the same pattern of who Jesus commends for their faith. It's the people who seek him out. Think of the woman who anoints his feet, the Roman centurion, the Samaritan leper who returns to thank him, the haemorrhaging woman, the blind beggar.

The one thing they have in common is their willingness to put their trust in his goodness, his healing, his justice, his mercy,

even when it was potentially risky to do so. They had faith because they had Jesus. What else did they need? And it's exactly the same for us today.

Jesus' call to us is to go and live in the light of what we already know and hear and see. In other words, to do faith, banal as it may seem, banal as a slave serving their master his dinner, banal as simply showing up when we're expected to show up.

Faith is known through lived experience, and it is about practising it when we are put to the test – not of course that it's a pass or fail test – it's about moving forward in the ways of Jesus, regardless of uncertainty, fear or anxiety. Luke's Gospel points to faith as praxis, an on-going spiral of reflection, action and grace.

Yet our Habakkuk reading reminds us that faith is rarely easy. The prophet pleads for an explanation of the violence and injustice he sees all around him and the answer is it will end – but not yet. So faith is not only about trusting, but also about being patient. I'm sure we can all remember impatiently counting down the days to Christmas or birthday, or the plaintive cry 10 miles into a 200 mile car journey Are we nearly there yet?.

Down the centuries, the Church, sadly, hasn't helped in any of this by giving the impression that faith is antithetical to doubts or fears or confusion, that when it comes to faith, our problem is scarcity. That's a cruel and damaging lie.

Having faith does not mean we will never struggle with doubts or anxiety. Far from it, having faith means pursuing God when it feels painful or even pointless. Faith is trusting Jesus, day by day, one step at a time even when he seems absent. As one commentator puts it, faith is living within God's extravagant decision to love and pursue us.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, and I quote, "we waste a great deal of time and energy looking for the key to the treasure box of More. What we don't have is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. We just have to consent to be where we are."

So Jesus doesn't sidestep the disciples' request because he is callous, but because he knows what would make for their flourishing – and ours too. Just as doing exercise increases the capacity of our heart, so doing faith will increase our faith.

The typhoons, hurricanes and floods that have devastated various parts of the world in the past two or three weeks are in themselves nothing new, but are a reminder, as our season of creation draws to a close, that the victims generally are those least able to protect themselves from their effects.

So they remind us too that focus of our faith should be directed towards compassion and justice for those on the margins, who don't have anyone looking out for them. We each have to find our own way of doing that, whether it be helping in the local food bank, going out on the Care Van, teaching English to refugees, it could be any number of

things, but we should be looking to do what we can, how we can, where we can and when we can, equally aware of our gifts and limitations.

At the root of Jesus' whole ministry was a desire to do God's will without thought of thanks or praise. And what was good enough for Jesus is good enough for us.

All we need to do, and I know it's easier said than done, is ask Jesus to teach us to use the faith we already have and to remember that a life of service to God is its own reward.