

Year C Harvest Festival 5th October 2025

Today 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 farmers in Scotland and the north of England growing spring barley.

As well as it being Harvest Festival, today also marks the end of the Creation Season, which concludes on the Sunday nearest to the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, which fell yesterday. St Francis's love of creation is well known and of course creation and harvest are closely linked. The healthier creation is, the better the harvest will be. While British harvests haven't yet been too badly affected by climate change, that isn't true of everywhere with extreme heat, fires and floods all making farmers' lives very difficult.

Even now around 10% of the world's population is affected by hunger, less than it was but still too high. The world grows enough food to feed everyone but sadly it's not always easily available to those at most risk of going hungry.

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.

Nevertheless Jesus' response to the request for more faith 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 century 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 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.

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. I think that is what Jesus is telling his disciples. However much faith or little faith they have, it is enough

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.

Storm Amy and similar weather events 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.