

Sermon on Sunday 2 October at St Mary's & St Andrew's by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: 2 Timothy 1:1-14 & Luke 17: 5-10



How is faith like a can opener?

Beware, says Jesus, there are consequences to your life choices. If you exploit the vulnerable, God takes this very seriously; it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around the neck than do that! (Think about how we can unthinkingly or inadvertently buy clothing made by people not being paid a living wage.)

Beware, says Jesus, of living a life not characterised by forgiveness. If you're brother sins and repents, forgive him and if he keeps doing it, keep forgiving him!* (How hard is that? It is so easy for us to just get angry and give up.)

So, I think that you, like me, feel a great deal of empathy and sympathy for the disciples. They want to do better and implore Jesus to increase their faith, yet the answer they get from Jesus seems not to fulfil their needs, not to respond to their feelings at all.

'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.

Too often we read or hear Jesus saying, 'If only you had some faith, the real kind, if only you believed more... you could live like this,' when instead, Jesus is stirring up their whole way of thinking; to try to have more faith is a dodgy idea because faith is not quantifiable.

School work used to be marked A to D; A being Excellent (you've got it all right), B indicating Good (you've been working hard), C satisfactory (you don't really get it yet, you need to work harder) and D poor (implying that you were going very wrong somewhere or not trying). Then there was the use of plus and minus; A- (so nearly perfect) B+ very good, B- (good but could do better), C+ almost good and C- (you could have been satisfactory).

Then it became more student focussed; 'You need to do this list of things to do better,' and, 'Mark yourself out of ten'. For many of us, this idea of being marked and labelled carries on in work and even in life itself; we can feel as if we are being given a mark by our peers and society – based on our success, lifestyle, our children or our ability to keep it together. This way of viewing ourselves even creeps into our practice of religion. We talk in ways that measure our own faith and sometimes are tempted to measure the faith of others. For example, we may describe people as holy or devout and see ourselves as able to serve the church in practical ways or try to love our neighbour. Or we may talk about being strong or weak in our prayer life.

Jesus is saying, 'Think about what it means to have faith'. Is it about obedience to rules, whether these are how to worship or ethical commands? Is it about having the power to do things in God's name? Is it about being humble or thankful? If so, it's tempting to say faith is about getting it right or doing more. Then we get back to labelling – Am I an A, B, C or D. If I had more faith, I would do better; I would be able to do more of what Jesus is asking me to do.

More or less, better or could do better, rewarded or punished. Jesus says it is not about this. Having enough faith is not the issue for Jesus, he says simply have faith - a little goes a long way. Having faith is about living by faith. He uses the image of a slave, sometimes translated 'servant', to say that living in faith is to live as God expects us to, it is not about doing more and getting more reward - it is about **living with God**.

'Faith' means 'trust'. Ask: Do I trust God or not? Trusting includes accepting that God wants the best for our spiritual well-being, that he wants to transform us, and is supportive in doing that. It includes trusting that God is working with us in our service to him through serving others, that he is with us when things become uncomfortable because holding fast to our faith can require difficult decisions and unwanted and unmerited consequences.

Faith in this sense is like a can opener delivering the sustenance that means we can thrive; faith opens us up so God's presence can work with us to sustain us in our living. A little faith can go a long way, it can lead to great glory for God.

Faith is a relationship. With all relationships they can appear to us to be working well or just not be happening; the other can feel close or distant, we can spend more or less time together, talk a lot or lose touch. In a human relationship we can break up and never see each other again, living far apart/ With God, we may not 'feel' God is present, we may even say we feel that we have lost our faith, but God is still present. So, faith is partly a world view or life view; an acceptance that my life is not me-centred and instead seeing life as God-centred. Faith is challenging and at times will be extra challenging for each one of us. Times can be uncertain, produce great anxiety and rock our sense of well-being and security.

Sometimes we don't 'feel' anything, our faith feels like it is on the wane and God feels far away - we just have to trust and wait and keep God's commands with the pattern of Jesus as our Guide. It Is not about trying harder, praying more furtively, achieving more brownie points by making the effort to be super humble. Yes, we are called to change, but we change by trusting that God will change us and by asking him to do this. We change by making space to slow down and listen and so allow him to come into our hearts and minds and give us the strength to walk in his ways. It's God that can uproot trees and plant them in the sea and he can do this by working in our lives.

****Read the verses just before the start of the part of Luke's Gospel set this Sunday.***

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