

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

1 Pet 1:25

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

The word of the Lord remains forever.

This is the word that has been proclaimed to you.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Luke 17:5-10; L141C

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

The Lord replied,

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,

you would say to this mulberry tree,

'Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.



Reflecting on the Gospel

Philosophers and thinkers debate the meaning of justice and charity. Justice is often considered the doing or giving what is owed to another, for example, money, labor, or some other arrangement. On the other hand, charity is the gift one gives expecting nothing in return. A philosophical parlor game centers around the definition of charity. Can an act be considered charity if the doer expects a thank you? Or does the expectation of an expression of gratitude annul the act of charity, which is given expecting *nothing* in return?

The disciples have a simple request of Jesus today: "Increase our faith." How many of us have made the same request? But what did the disciples mean by it? And what would we mean by it? Further, what is the point of the request?

In another example of hyperbole, Jesus responds by saying that if their faith was the size of a mustard seed (about the size of a sesame seed) they would be able to move trees. Now, nobody, not even Jesus, moved trees. Significantly, there are other gospels where the claim is that they could with faith the size of a mustard seed move *mountains* (Mark 11:23; Matt 17:20). But apparently Luke thought that was hyperbole taken too far. For in this gospel the extent of faith is moving only trees. Mountains are not mentioned. Nevertheless, the point is simply that they have little faith, not even that the size of a mustard seed.

Jesus continues his lesson with a demonstration of the proper attitude of a servant who does what he is told expecting nothing, not even gratitude, in return. That attitude, striking for us today, is proper for discipleship.

So the disciples' query about increasing their faith brings a mild rebuke from Jesus, stating that their faith is smaller than the size of a mustard seed. Even so, they should simply carry out their mission without expecting even a thank you.

This "tough love" approach to discipleship may seem at odds with the Jesus that has been portrayed in much of the gospel. It's as though he is sure to put the disciples in their place so they turn their attention away from their own wants, desires, and requests, and on to carrying out the mission of Jesus. This is the true call of discipleship, to serve the master rather than oneself. And upon offering and completing that service, to have no expectations at all, not even a thank you.

This is a tall order. How many of us, upon performing an act of kindness, no matter how small, appreciate a word of gratitude. In fact, many of us likely expect that. But the story we have today presents a different standard. It would be good for us to reevaluate our role in this relationship. We are mere servants, carrying out the wishes of the Lord. When complete, we are happy simply to have done his bidding.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Today's gospel reminds us of the place disciples have before the Lord. Jesus uses an image from the ancient world about servants and a master. Such an image can be problematic today, but it reflects the worldview of antiquity. We, as disciples, are advised to do what we are told, follow directions, and carry out what we are obliged to do. Such an image does not leave much room for self-

"Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here immediately and take your place at table'? Would he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished'? Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.'"

agency, or self-determination, other than to align oneself with the Lord. And this is why the image has some challenges as we bring it to the modern world. And yet, doing the will of the Father is precisely the role of the disciple, the follower. Our task is to discern that will in our world and to carry it out, expecting nothing in return. We die to our own wants, needs, and desires, noble as they might be, such as an increase in faith. Instead, we follow the direction set for us, using our gifts, talents, and abilities in such a way that there is not even the expectation of a thank you.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: Increase our faith.

To the point: What is faith? The Letter to the Hebrews defines it as, “the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (11:1; NABRE). The disciples continue to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, the path that will end in his death and resurrection. We might wonder what are the disciples hoping for at this moment when they ask Jesus, “Increase our faith”? Do they harbor a desire for Jesus to be the kind of Messiah who will lead them in a military revolt that will free Israel from the oppression of the Romans? Are they expecting a triumphant continuation of Jesus’ life and ministry that might include earthly power and authority? Jesus has already chided the disciples once, calling them, “you of little faith” (Luke 12:28; NABRE). Their request for Jesus to increase their faith seems reasonable. Perhaps Jesus’ abrupt response points to the disciples’ need to reevaluate what they are hoping for.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: The book of Habakkuk contains a dialogue between God and the prophet. The prophet, frustrated with violence and injustice, cries out to God in reproach, “How long, O LORD? I cry for help / but you do not listen!” God responds with reassurance, urging patience and trust in God’s help, “if it delays, wait for it, / it will surely come, it will not be late.”

to experience: Faith requires perseverance, especially in times of distress and suffering. In these moments, we believe in the God of justice who does not will that which is evil, but continues to work for the good of all.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: Today’s gospel, and the gospels of the following two Sundays all touch on the concept of faith. While the disciples’ request for the Lord to increase their faith meets with a harsh response, next Sunday the leper who returns to thank Jesus will have his faith upheld as the reason for his salvation. Jesus also praises the faith of the persistent widow in the gospel the week following. In Psalm 95 we are given a metaphor for faith, “For he is our God, / and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.” Sheep are known for their complete and total trust in their shepherd.

to psalmist preparation: Sheep follow their shepherd because they know him or her. While their sight and depth perception is a bit limited, sheep have excellent hearing and the sound of their voice is the primary way they recognize their shepherd. A stranger using the same words or sounds will not be able to effectively call a herd of sheep, only their shepherd’s voice will be successful. How do you hone your ear to be attentive to the voice of the Lord?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

The prophet Habakkuk, living in a time of violence and injustice, cries out to God, “How long, O LORD? I cry for help / but you do not listen!” In the world today, what are the dire situations that cause you to cry out to God?

In Psalm 95 we are given the image of our relationship with God as that of a shepherd and sheep. Sheep recognize and follow their shepherd by listening to his or her voice. How do you cultivate deep listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd?

St. Paul urges Timothy, “[S]tir into flame / the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands.” What are the spiritual practices that help you to keep the flame of faith alive?

The disciples implore Jesus, “Increase our faith.” If faith is “the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1), what is it that you are hoping for? What unseen realities are you convinced of being true?