

Faith ...
John Docherty, 6 October, 2019

Faith the size of a mustard seed ... that's the theme for today.

Faith, on its own, is a pretty familiar theme – it is, after all, the central reason why we are here today.

Faith the size of a mustard seed, is also a pretty familiar theme. I'm sure you've all heard multiple sermons that try to elaborate on just what it means to have faith;

sermons that try to sift out some understanding of what Jesus means when he says in Luke that if you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could cause a tree to uproot itself and cast itself into the sea.

It *does* seem like a pretty dismissive appreciation of the faith of Jesus' followers to accuse them of having so little faith that it isn't even the size of a mustard seed;

and, by extension, it also seems like a pretty dismissive description of *our* faith – on the assumption that none of us have ever succeeded in causing a tree to uproot itself. I will confess that *I've* never been able to do that, or anything remotely like it.

But frankly, I think it's unfortunate that this passage from Luke tends to be read in isolation from the rest of the Gospel. As a stand-alone verse, it gives the impression that Jesus is encouraging his disciples to reach for the stars in embracing some kind of power that comes with being in intimate relationship with God.

He seems to be echoing what Matthew quotes Jesus saying in chapter 7 of *his* Gospel : “... ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you ...”.

In other words, he seems to be saying “if you only believe something strongly enough, you can make it happen, and if it doesn't happen, it's your own fault for having so little faith”.

But let me remind you that in the context of Jesus' words in Matthew, he's not encouraging his disciples to ask for the moon – he's encouraging them not to despair, because God cares for them, and will provide the necessities of life.

He also follows this up a few verses later in chapter 7 of Matthew's Gospel with these words : “... In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets ...”

It's a way, it seems to me, of grounding God's promise to provide the necessities of life in our responsibility to each other; a responsibility to ensure that we all have what we need to make it through the day, and that this is how God will honour the promise to provide the necessities of life.

As for the passage from Luke, I said I think it's unfortunate that it is usually read in isolation from the rest of the Gospel. By that I mean that if you extend the reading back just a couple of verses, to verse 3, you'll read this :

“... Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.”

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed ...”

It puts a slightly different spin to the image of what kind of faith Jesus is referring to, doesn't it?

It's less a call to arms to have the kind of faith that will work miracles than it is a call to arms to have the kind of faith it takes to trust each other and treat each other the way we'd like to be treated.

Not as sexy as causing trees to uproot themselves, perhaps, but no less miraculous.

Treating each other the way we'd like to be treated ...

How's *that* for a radical idea?

But it's also, when paired with the Matthew passage, a call to not lose hope in the face of difficult situations.

A call to persevere, even when the circumstances seem bleak.

A call to trust that God will be there in the midst of difficulties, by being there in the lives of those who are seeking to be faithful disciples.

The cry of the apostles in Luke is to increase their faith as they grapple with relationships and with feelings of hurt or betrayal. Jesus' response to them is a way of saying you need to hang in there and believe that God is able to help you work through this, and that God will ultimately bring true healing.

But, of course, as I've said in other meditations, this kind of faithful adherence to a moral code that requires us to be patient and willing to give the benefit of the doubt to those who have wronged us and whose regret may seem shallow, may sometimes mean that people will feel they can walk over us; treat us like naive children.

This struggle is not unique to us Mennonites.

The passage that was read from the first chapter of Habakkuk is his cry of distress at the injustice he sees around him :

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you won't hear?
How long can I cry “violence!” and you won't save? ...
Why do the wicked surround the righteous, and why is justice perverted?”

It's an old cry.

Habakkuk wondered how to deal with those who refused to treat others as they would like to be treated.

The apostles wondered how they could possibly find the faith to treat others as *they* would like to be treated.

And I suspect most of us here struggle to know how to find the wisdom, courage, and strength, to treat others as we would like to be treated.

But I think part of the answer to *that* is to let others know how we would like to be treated. We, of course, need to do that with respect and with some degree of humility, but I don't think it's unfitting for people of faith to make clear what they think constitutes proper behaviour – in fact, one version of *that* has historically probably been what we've most often been accused of : a self-righteous, overlording kind of attitude that dictates to others how they need to behave.

But *that* version is not what I think Jesus promoted. I think what he promoted is an approach to others that clearly demonstrates why their behaviour is hurtful or destructive in an attempt to encourage them to take responsibility for their behaviour and to work at converting that behaviour into something constructive and life-giving.

That's called repentance.

All of the prophets of the Old Testament used that approach.

John the Baptist used that approach.

Jesus used that approach.

Modern-day voices of moral imperative – voices like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa – used that approach.

I'm not sure I'm quite ready to put her on the same level as those I've just mentioned, but Greta Thunberg is using that approach.

She may or may not be a personal who holds a religious faith, but she is calling the political leaders of the world to repentance where climate change is concerned.

If you've listened to any of her addresses over the last few months, I expect at least some of you have been as impressed as I've been by her eloquence, her passion, and her honest and direct challenge to those in a position to effect change on climate policies.

I don't know if she writes her own speeches, or if they're written by someone else on her behalf, but she has a refreshingly blunt, but well-researched, way of getting her message across.

One of her most recent speeches was to the participants at the UN Climate Action Summit, and I suspect that some of the content of that speech is probably what you're most familiar with.

I'd like to quote a few extracts from that address.

"... This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

...

"You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

...

"[But] We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not."

She also spoke some months ago to the UK Houses of Parliament.

“... In the year 2030 I will be 26 years old. My little sister Beata will be 23. Just like many of your own children or grandchildren. That is a great age, we have been told. When you have all of your life ahead of you. But I am not so sure it will be that great for us.

I was fortunate to be born in a time and place where everyone told us to dream big; I could become whatever I wanted to. I could live wherever I wanted to. People like me had everything we needed and more. Things our grandparents could not even dream of. We had everything we could ever wish for and yet now we may have nothing.

Now we probably don't even have a future any more.

Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money. It was stolen from us every time you said that the sky was the limit, and that you only live once.

You lied to us. You gave us false hope. You told us that the future was something to look forward to. And the saddest thing is that most children are not even aware of the fate that awaits us. We will not understand it until it's too late. And yet we are the lucky ones. Those who will be affected the hardest are already suffering the consequences. But their voices are not heard.

...

Did you hear what I just said? Is my English OK? Is the microphone on? Because I'm beginning to wonder.

During the last six months I have travelled around Europe for hundreds of hours in trains, electric cars and buses, repeating these life-changing words over and over again. But no one seems to be talking about it, and nothing has changed. In fact, the emissions are still rising.

...

the basic problem is the same everywhere. And the basic problem is that basically nothing is being done to halt – or even slow – climate and ecological breakdown, despite all the beautiful words and promises.

...

People always tell me and the other millions of school strikers that we should be proud of ourselves for what we have accomplished.

...

We children are not sacrificing our education and our childhood for you to tell us what you consider is politically possible in the society that you have created. We have not taken to the streets for you to take selfies with us, and tell us that you really admire what we do.

We children are doing this to wake the adults up. We children are doing this for you to put your differences aside and start acting as you would in a crisis. We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back.

I hope my microphone was on. I hope you could all hear me.”

I think Habakkuk, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and all the other prophets and Jesus could echo those last words of Greta.

“I hope my microphone was on. I hope you could all hear me.”

The message that we need to love God with everything we have and love each other as much as we love ourselves needs repeating over, and over, and over again until it is heard, and believed, and fully embraced.

And I suspect that Jesus might follow that message up with a line of his own.

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can accomplish this thing.”