

Text: Luke 17:5-19

Sunday 31st March 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Two weeks' ago, we began our journey towards Easter, and we tuned in to that part of Luke's gospel where Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem. On Sunday we had our final service before we reach Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. We're hoping to have some online prayers and reflections then for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, led for us by ministers in the Braes area, and more details will be available on Sunday.

In our passage for this evening, we have the third and final story where Samaritans are talked about and it follows on after a lengthy teaching portion, which began

back in Luke chapter 15. In the particular section we heard tonight, it began and ended on the topic of faith, and that's where we'll start this evening.

As I said on Sunday, **having faith just now is hard**, we have questions, some people may even scoff at the idea of faith, scoff at it having value and relevance. But I think that hard times do not mean faith cannot exist, or that faith is simply wishful thinking. It is possible to be people of faith even amidst uncertain times.

But as the example of the disciples teaches us, it's OK to be honest with Jesus about our doubts. In verse 5, we see that the apostles, those close friends of Jesus, said to Him: 'Increase our faith!'

Here are the people that Jesus is training up, training up to be involved in His continuing ministry, and despite having seen so many miracles already, they are now struggling, they perceive their faith is maybe not quite big enough for what Jesus asks of them.

And what does Jesus ask of them? We didn't read those particular verses tonight but if you open your Bible, you can see in verse 1 that Jesus speaks of keeping faith even when things come along that might cause some to stumble, then in verses 2 to 3, Jesus speaks of living in such a manner as not to undermine another's faith, then finally in verses 3 to 4, Jesus teaches that we are to forgive as often as repentance occurs.

What's quite striking here, is that the things which provoke the disciples to say, 'increase our faith', are not great wonders or undertakings which we might normally associate with needing faith. We may more naturally think of deeds such as praying for healing, or being asked to preach, or give up something that is dear to us.

Yet, what Jesus shares here, are every day, normal activities. Keeping the faith, building others up, and forgiving as often as needed. Doesn't sound very grand, but aren't they just as hard? Even now, amidst this pandemic, don't we face all three to some degree? Keeping the faith when events around us might seem to belittle our beliefs. Building others up when it's so much easier to jump on the bandwagon of criticism, doubt and moaning. And as we face lockdown, maybe for weeks

upon weeks, and we get grumpy with one another because we're living in such close proximity all the time, or we get bitter because we are alone and we feel forgotten, is not forgiveness needed in such times?

I wonder, as time passes and the lockdown extends, might not we also be inclined, with the disciples, to cry out, 'Lord increase our faith' because these otherwise mundane tasks are actually quite demanding.

So, what is Jesus reply? He says, 'If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it will obey you.' (Luke 17:6) Clearly, Jesus is using hyperbole because He and the disciples never did such a thing themselves.

Instead, Jesus is trying to highlight that it's not the amount of faith that is important, but rather simply its presence and what underpins or defines our faith. Sinclair Ferguson, a professor of Systematic Theology, reminds us of this: '...our spiritual forefathers used to say that little faith gets the same Saviour as great faith, but it may not get his greatness.' (Sinclair Ferguson, *To Seek and To Save*, page 66)

What he's saying, as with Jesus, is that what is important is not the size of our faith, but rather the substance of our faith. Often, we are tempted to say, "I don't have enough faith", or "He or she has more faith than I". But such statements reveal that we think faith is dependant on us, that what we feel, what we can muster up, is what defines the character and strength of our faith.

But Jesus, as with our spiritual forefathers, is saying something else. They are revealing that faith should have its character and strength defined by God, rather than ourselves. This means, argues Ferguson, that ‘faith should be described as the extent to which our trust in the Lord is in keeping with the greatness of God’s person and the certainty of His promises.’ For example: if I trust, that Jesus is always with me unto the end of the age, as He has promised to be, and I trust this because I know Him to be alive, then this shapes my faith and so defines my living, my choices, and my perspective.

But, if I believe Jesus to be God but quite distant, detached from our experience, then I do have faith, I do have access to Jesus, but I do not appreciate His greatness

as fully as I should, and so my faith is diminished and its impact upon my life is equally limited.

Faith, which can tell a mulberry tree to jump into the sea, is a faith which appreciates the greatness of God and lives accordingly. It's not about the size of our faith, but rather the substance of our faith, and the substance of our faith is matured and maintained by the extent to which we grow in our relationship with God, and we do that by appreciating more of His person and His promises.

So, that's why we're encouraging everyone to invest time in their relationship with God during this time of isolation, and we principally grow in our relationship with God as we dig into His Word, because it's in His Word that we learn of His person and promises. We've offered a

couple of ideas for this in our Sunday services, with an online reading plan begun yesterday, exploring faith and doubts. It's not too late to get involved and details are still available on our website and Facebook page.

But, whether you join the reading plans or not, please invest some time in your relationship with God by getting into His Word. Then, the substance of your faith can be matured and maintained in line with the true revelation of God, as you learn of His person and promises.

On Sunday, I also mentioned that this issue of faith among the apostles is followed on after with the story of the ten lepers, where faith in Jesus arises in the most unlikely of places – a Samaritan leper. It was that man who evidenced a faith which had substance – He

recognised in Jesus the God of all creation and that Jesus the God-man was overflowing with loving kindness.

I said on Sunday, that loving kindness was one way of unpacking the words ‘pity’ or ‘mercy’, which is what the ten lepers asked of Jesus in the first place. Jesus did heal them, He granted what they asked for, they experienced His loving kindness. But they do so, after following His command to: ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests.’ (Luke 17:14)

I deliberately skipped over that part of the passage because our service was seeking to be all age. But now, I’d like to give you a little more context for those words.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were given instructions regarding various skin conditions, and as I

outlined, it was pretty hard back then to tell what people had. So, anyone with one of these particular skin conditions had to leave home, they had to leave the village, because those skin conditions could be spread to other people and the only way to protect the community was for those people to be isolated and removed.

But it was also possible for someone to be welcomed back into the community if their condition changed or went away. At that point, they were to go to their local priest, for only they could legally declare a leper “clean” and healthy, and so able then to return to a normal life.

What’s striking in the story of the ten lepers, is that one returns to Jesus, rather than going on to find the priest. Clearly, we’re right to talk about gratitude and

thankfulness because it's there in the passage, and we'll come back to that soon. But this idea of Jesus being asked for mercy, and of the one leper coming to Jesus, when all the rest go seeking their priest, does call to mind what the **writer to the Hebrews wrote**: '...[Jesus] shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by **their fear of death**...For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.' (Hebrews 2:14-17)

There's a lot packed into those few verses, but did you notice that the writer speaks of Jesus as a merciful high

priest? In the Old Testament, the high priest had the role of once a year going into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle, or temple, so as to make atonement for the people. This was part of the wider system which secured their forgiveness of sin such that they were in right standing with God.

The writer of Hebrews makes a lengthy argument that Jesus is the eternal, perfect high priest, bringing in a new and eternal covenant between God and humanity, such that any who will put their faith in Jesus can have their sins forgiven, once for all, remembered no more, and then given unrestricted access to God's presence because they are made children of God through the Son of God who died in their place, even though He Himself was perfectly sinless.

But to establish that new, eternal covenant, Jesus had to be both fully man and fully God, which is what the writer said in the passage we read. As such, Jesus is then our merciful high priest, He is able to represent both God and mankind, and stand in the gap between us, offering us mercy, loving kindness, through His own sacrifice, and welcoming us into the family of God with right standing before God.

It's in that place, as the writer outlines, that we are then freed from the fear of death, because eternal life is secured for us by Jesus, our merciful high priest.

Now, coming back to the story of the ten lepers, it's interesting that the one leper who cannot go to the Jewish priests, because he's a Samaritan, comes instead

to Jesus. Does that individual realise that he needs no other priest, for Jesus, the God-man, is priest enough?

Friends, we've spoken tonight of developing a faith which has substance by learning of the person and promises of God, such that it matures and is maintained. I wonder, if the example of the Samaritan, is not only one of thankfulness, but of recognising something of the person and promises of Jesus: that He is merciful, overflowing with loving kindness, ready to forgive and welcome us into the family of God, if only we will bow the knee and respond in faith to Him. That kind of faith has a measure of substance, and by such faith we can be freed of fear and as we sung on Sunday, having a hope which is steadfast and sure.

I think, as we recognise more of the person and promises of Jesus, that a real depth of thankfulness will overflow within us, and so let's close with some reflections on that idea from the passage.

It's clear from what Jesus says that thankfulness is important, especially thankfulness to Jesus Himself, and that's something we are taught again and again. The Apostle Paul **encouraged us, as we saw, to, 'Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (Eph. 5:19-20)**

So, are you someone who's thankful? I really valued those words **from Tom Wright, who said: '...our God is the giver of all things: every mouthful of food we take, every**

breath of air we inhale, every note of music we hear, every smile on the face of a friend, a child, a spouse – all that, and a million things more, are good gifts of his generosity. The world didn't need to be like this. It could have been far more drab.' (Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, page 206)

I wonder, have you begun to do anything about that yet? Because being a people of thankfulness, not only makes us less prone to anger or bitterness, it also guards against that common human tendency to think God “owes” us or that God is some kind of “genie in a bottle”.

I think that's part of the reason behind Jesus' words in verses 7 to 10: that nothing we do, or experience, can put God in our debt, because He has been generous already,

and immeasurably added to His generosity through the death of His perfect Son, our merciful high priest.

Again, as our faith develops substance, rather than size, by appreciating the person and promises of God, then we are freed from unhealthy perceptions of God, we are enabled to see His goodness, His grace, His loving kindness, such that He owes us nothing and we owe Him everything.

So, how are you going to develop **a rhythm of thanking God for the gifts of His generosity? When I was in training, I came across a spiritual discipline called Examen, and it's a form of prayer that helps us realise the many good gifts of God throughout our day. We don't have time to go into it just now, but I'll put up some links on our website and**

Facebook page if you want to dig into that, because it's a practice that I've found helpful, even though I'm only beginning now to cultivate in my own life.

Friends, as we journey with Jesus towards Easter, may we be a people whose faith grows in substance as we see more clearly the person of God, that He is full of loving kindness, that He comes close, and out of His abundant generosity give us good things, including Himself. May we also, appreciate afresh the promises we have from God, particularly the promises secured for us through Jesus, who gave Himself for us upon the Cross, that we might be welcomed into His family and have a hope that is sure and steadfast, even in the most difficult of times. To Him, be all glory and thanks, now and forevermore. Amen.