

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4; Psalm 94 (95); 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

Luke 17:1 *Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2 It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4 And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”*

5 The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” 6 The Lord replied, “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.

7 “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? 8 Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The teachings here seem rather disparate (even vv. 1-4 contain two distinct issues). The NRSV has the general heading “Some Sayings of Jesus” and that seems accurate. The various sections are proverbial in tone, so that the meaning is intrinsic to each rather than found in the surrounding context.

As a result, the verses chosen for today combine traditions. Vv. 5-6 are also found once in Mark in the context of a fig tree (Mark 11:20-23) and twice in Matthew (Matt 17:20; 21:21). Our version in Luke seems to be a conflation of the two (compare the trees, mountains



and seas). Why anyone might want to plant a mulberry tree in the sea is not immediately evident! Vv. 7-10 are unique to Luke and without comparison elsewhere. The wide setting in Luke is his emphasis on hospitality and on faith.

It might be possible to think that the first section expresses the difficulty of faith felt by the disciples and, in the second section, Jesus is made to respond by saying the challenge is well within reach!

KIND OF WRITING

The first scene is proverbial in the form in an anecdote, sparked by the request of the disciples. The second scene is really a parable—but a peculiar one for Luke. Unlike the parables in Luke 15, there is no joy, no laughter and the teaching is in tension with the teaching of the Prodigal Son, where the father rejects slavery as the appropriate mode of relationship. While that latter teaching stands, the present parable must be in response to a situation of complacency or over-confidence. Humility (a true assessment of one’s self, not the same as humiliation) is certainly a theme of Luke’s (see the second set of verses in the next section).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Look, the one whose desires are not upright will faint from exhaustion, but the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness. (Habakkuk 2:4 NET)

I kept my faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted”; I said in my consterna-

Thought for the day

The cry of the disciples to the Lord, “increase our faith,” resonates very much with us today. Is being a person of faith harder today than it has ever been? In one sense no: previous generations too had to struggle. But today has its particular challenges. For the most part, public discourse is against faith in general and against church in particular. It would be easy to lose heart. Just holding on to faith would be enough, not to mention growing!! We grow in faith by desire and by practice—desire for God and the practice of prayer. The times call us to focus on the heart of the Christian project—Jesus and the Gospel—and on the heart of discipleship—love and service.

Prayer

“Lord, increase our faith!” Open our hearts to your presence in our lives.

tion, “Everyone is a liar.” (Psalms 116:10–11 NRSV)

Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. (Psalms 37:5–7 NRSV)

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honour; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. (Psalms 62:5–8 NRSV)

But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” (Psalms 31:14 NRSV)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

On Faith: And blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke

1:45) He said to them, “Where is your *faith*?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” (Luke 8:25) “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own *faith* may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31–32)

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of *faith*. (Romans 3:27)

On Humility: For he has looked with favour on the *lowliness* of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; (Luke 1:48) He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the *lowly*. (Luke 1:52) For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who *humble* themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11) “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who *humble* themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)

When they came to Paul, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all *humility* and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. (Acts 20:18–19)

ST PAUL

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith, just as it is written, “The righteous by faith will live.” (Romans 1:16–17 NET)

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1Corinthians 13:2–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 5 Faith as a noun or adjective is frequent in Luke (Luke 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48; 17:5–6, 19; 18:8, 42; 22:32) and also as a verb (Luke 1:20, 45; 8:12–13, 50; 16:11; 20:5; 22:67; 24:25). “Increase” in English has the same nuance as in Greek: it means to add to some-

thing that is already there.

Verse 6 Cf. Matthew’s version: *He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”* (Matthew 17:20). In Luke, the mustard seed was already mentioned to create a contrast between small beginnings and great growth. *The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.* (Luke 13:19) Transplanting a tree into the sea is hyperbole to get across the message (the action as such seems rather futile).

Verse 7 Servant is a major category



occurring frequently throughout Luke (x 26). The opening question expects the answer “no one”, because in the context, masters do not serve their slaves! There is a tremendous contrast with chapter twelve in Luke: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, *he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.* If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. (Luke 12:35–38) It is a good reminder that the partial insights of single passages need to be read in the light of other teachings elsewhere in the Gospel.

Verse 8 In effect, when you have done the basic requirements, don’t think that is anything extraordinary. The extra required in Christians is captured in another passage in Luke: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?”

Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32–36)

Verse 9 The very next story deals with gratitude towards the Lord himself.

Verse 10 The word worthless occurs only twice in the NT. The other occurrence is alarming: “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:30)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Faith can move mountains...well it can certainly get us moving. Recall a time when you were full of self-doubt, skepticism about a project, or lacking trust in God. What was that like? Contrast this with times when you believed in yourself, or in the value of a project you had undertaken, or when your faith and trust in God were strong. What kind of faith have you found enriched your life?

2. Faith is like a mustard seed—small—and sometimes we may be tempted to wait till our faith grows. Part of the message in the gospel is to use the faith we have, even though it may be small. That is how we grow in belief in ourselves and in God’s presence in our lives. Does your experience back up this?

3. It is nice when what we do is recognised and acknowledged, but the desire for recognition leaves us vulnerable. It is not always forthcoming. It can be helpful if our main motivation in doing something is the value of the action itself. Have you experienced this?

4. Love is a free gift. What is given lovingly is not given because of a claim. What is your experience of the freedom of love, given and received?

PRAYER

God, the rock of our salvation, whose gifts can never fail, deepen the faith you have already bestowed and let its power be seen in your servants.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

For God gave us a Spirit of power and love and self-control

2 Tim 1:3 *I am thankful to God, whom I have served with a clear conscience as my ancestors did, when I remember you in my prayers as I do constantly night and day. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I recall your sincere faith that was alive first in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am sure is in you.*

2 Tim 1:6 Because of this I remind you to rekindle God’s gift that you possess through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control. 8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me, a prisoner for his sake, but by God’s power accept your share of suffering for the gospel.

2 Tim 1:13 Hold to the standard of sound words that you heard from me and do so with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Protect that good thing (*parathēkē*) entrusted to you, through the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Losing fervour and having to rekindle it is not unknown in the Christian community, either individually or for the church itself. At community level, the question can become critical: how to be faithful to the past and innovative towards the future. Of course, restorationism or nostalgia for a supposedly golden age is simply a (relatively) sophisticated form of denial.

KIND OF WRITING

Vv.	2 TIMOTHY
1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-14	<i>Thanksgiving</i>
1:15-18	<i>A personal note</i>
2:1-4:8	<i>Body of the letter</i>
4:9-22	Personal note and prayer

Like 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy is most likely written in the name of Paul to a later, probably third, generation of believers. Within the letter, Paul is portrayed as an old man in prison and the letter is in the genre of last will and testament, a kind of writing familiar from the period. Compare: Genesis 49 (*Jacob*); Deuteronomy 31 (*Moses*); Joshua 24 (*Joshua*), John

14-16 (*Jesus*); Acts 20:18-38 (*Paul*).

Our reading is the substance of thanksgiving (with extra verses added above).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The issue behind 2 Timothy is a frequent one in intentional communities: how to manage after the departure of the founder / mentor / genius. Accordingly the letter has a valedictory tone. At the same time, there is a message of consolidation for the present moment.

RELATED PASSAGES

Before God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, I solemnly charge you to carry out these commands without prejudice or favouritism of any kind. (1Timothy 5:21 NET)

I charge you before God who gives life to all things and Christ Jesus who made his good confession before Pontius Pilate, to obey this command without fault or failure until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,—whose appearing the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, will reveal at the right time. (1Timothy 6:13-15 NET)

They will maintain the outward appearance of religion but will have repudiated its power. So avoid people like these. (2Timothy 3:5 NET)

Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2Timothy 2:3 NET)

This saying is trustworthy: If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us. (2Timothy 2:11-12 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 6 The overall tone is much friendlier, compared with 1 Timothy. See above 1 Tim 5:21 and 6:14. The laying on of hands seems to have been by Paul alone. Verses 7 and 8 will go on to make explicit what is meant here. In any case, ordination is a gift to be constantly rekindled, as both gift and assignment.

Verse 7 The charisms are attributed to the Spirit—a genuine teaching Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. It is implied that Timothy has become timid and fearful. Timothy is not to be afraid of the real power

entrusted to him (2 Tim 3:5 above). Cf. *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, “Abba, Father.”* (Romans 8:15 NET)

Verse 8 The rekindling of charisma takes in as well the capacity to suffer for the Gospel, on the example of Paul. Only here in the Pastoral is Paul called a prisoner (cf. Eph 3:1; 4:1; Phlm 1, 9). To suffer *with* is distinctive of 2 Timothy. See above 2 Tim 2:3 and 2:11-12. Conflict with the culture is to be expected, if the proclamation is genuine. “Not to be ashamed” reminds us that the cross was indeed shameful and scandalous.

Verse 13 Paul himself is being held up as the standard for later generations. Standard (*hupotyposis*) has the connotation of model, prototype or example. “Sound” translates a Greek word meaning to be healthy or wholesome and represents an important theme in the Pastorals (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). The Pauline combination faith, love and Christ Jesus reminds us of 1 Tim 1:14.

Verse 14 The NET “good thing” would be better rendered “deposit” (*parathēkē*), a term with a considerable future. It is the equivalent of a tradition to be safeguarded and the writer has in mind the Pauline inheritance of the communities. Deposit is used three times in the Pastoral: 1 Tim 1:18, 2 Tim 2:12 and 14. For the historical Paul, the faith is never merely a deposit. The relatively few references in the Pastorals to the Spirit is not without significance in this regard. In the Pastorals, the false teachers are frequently in view: 2 Tim 3:1-9, 1 Tim 4:1-5, 6:3-10).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Are there aspects of my calling and faith in need of rekindling? What has happened? What will inspire me?
2. Are there time when I am even ashamed of the Gospel? In what contexts and why?
3. Fidelity to the tradition *and* openness to the Spirit today: not an easy balance and yet essential. How do I see it myself?

PRAYER

God, who make all things new, help us to receive the past in such a way that we may be open your actions in the present moment. In this way, may we bring the Gospel alive in our times. Amen.

The person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness

Hab 1:2 How long, LORD, must I cry for help?
 But you do not listen!
 I call out to you, “Violence!”
 But you do not intervene!

3a Why do you force me to witness injustice?
 3b Why do you put up with wrongdoing?
 3c Destruction and violence confront me;
 3d conflict is present and one must endure strife.

4 *For this reason the law lacks power,
 and justice is never carried out.
 Indeed, the wicked intimidate the innocent.
 For this reason justice is perverted.*

2:2 The LORD responded:
 “Write down this message! Record it legibly on tablets,
 so the one who announces it may read it easily.

3 For the message is a witness to what is decreed;
 it gives reliable testimony about how matters will turn out.
 Even if the message is not fulfilled right away, wait patiently;
 for it will certainly come to pass—it will not arrive late.

4 Look, the one whose desires are not upright
 will faint from exhaustion,
 but the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading is well chosen as a match for the Gospel. However, the passage has a special interest on account of Paul’s use of Hab 2:4 (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; see also Heb 10:38). The translation above is the more faithful NET, not the NRSV.

KIND OF WRITING

Our first two verses are a speech of the prophet himself (1:2-3). Our closing verses are part of a somewhat unclear assurance from God (2:2-5).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Habbakuk, one of the twelve minor prophets, should be more read because it raises the “only question,” why do the unrighteous go unpunished if God is truly a God of justice? The prophet identifies himself as a prophet in 1:1 and 3:1. Not much else is known about him.

The book is in three parts:

- 1:1-2:5—a dialogue
- 2:6-20—woe oracles
- 3:1-19—a prayer of Habbakuk

Our reading comes from the beginning and the end of the opening dialogue. Hab 3 is familiar from the Breviary, where it is read on Friday morning prayer of week 2 in the four week cycle. It contains the disturbing phrase: *yet I calmly wait for the doom that will fall upon the people who assail us.* It is meant to be an

expression of confidence that God will eventually react. However, it serves to bring us into the main topic of the book.

Several dates for this book have been proposed, from the time of Hezekiah (701 BC) to the time of Alexander the Great (late fourth century BC). There is a reference in one text a period: For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. (Hab 1:6) This would place the text in the time of Jehoiakim (608-598). The Babylonians were on the move but had not yet reached Jerusalem.

RELATED PASSAGES

LORD, you have been active from ancient times; my sovereign God, you are immortal. LORD, you have made them your instrument of judgment. Protector, you have appointed them as your instrument of punishment. You are too just to tolerate evil; you are unable to condone wrongdoing. So why do you put up with such treacherous people? Why do you say nothing when the wicked devour those more righteous than they are? You made people like fish in the sea, like animals in the sea that have no ruler. (Habakkuk 1:12-14 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 1:2 The Lord is addressed directly and the complaint is given twice.

Notice the shift in intensity: the person praying calls for help, but then cries out “violence!”; “not listen” becomes “not intervene”, that is, the next step after listening is to do something.

Verse 1:3 The shift from 3a to 3b is remarkable: why do I have to put up with injustice; why does God put up with injustice? 3cd, although not very specific, describes an intense and difficult situation. The question arises, who is doing the injustice or are the Israelites agents or victims?

Verse 1:4 This verse—included to help a context reading—is best understood as internal to Israelite society. The features are clear: crime, personal violence, with the law either not enforced or abused. This may account for the intensity of the complaint as it is harder to take it from one’s own.

Verse 2:2 God’s proclamation is going to be public and clear.

Verse 2:3 There are two parts here; 3ab continues the message of v.2. 3cd is a call for patience—it may not all happen immediately.

Verse 2:4 This verse is interesting in its own right and for its use in the NT (as noted above). In the Hebrew Bible, the pronoun attached to the word faithful is “his”—somewhat ambiguous. Does it mean the faithfulness of the righteous person or that of God as righteous?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We have all felt the absence of God as we faced injustice and/or suffering. Then our prayer would surely have been both “why” and “how long”. How did I keep faith?

2. Faith, like love, involves waiting and really trusting. This is true for parents and children, true for bereavement and loss and so on. It contrast with our *instant* culture today, but we know that *instant* is often not *real*.

PRAYER

God, ever faithful and true, we do not always see your hand in what happens or your purpose in the direction of our lives. Inspired by Jesus’ own faithfulness, may we be true to our calling, to the path of discipleship, and to you, above all.

We make our prayer through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4; Psalm 94 (95); 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel begins with a plea for an increase of faith. The second part of Habakkuk does deal with faith—but there are interesting complications as we have seen.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Responsorial Psalm sits slightly incongruously with the reading: *O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts.* Perhaps we are meant to think of it as a prayer of steadfastness.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4

As you listen to this reading, you might ask yourself how often have you felt like this? Notice that the second part is as important as the first.

Second reading

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14

The temptation today is to be a little bit “ashamed” of our faith. It is not a new problem, as we hear.

Gospel

Luke 17:5-10

We are all here because we have some bit of faith—perhaps not as strong as it used to be. This reading is a challenge: would you *like* your faith to be increased...or perhaps not?!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 3 October

Bl Columba Marmion, abbot

The letter to the Galatians is one of the most important Christian documents ever written. The presenting issue — how much of the Jewish Law should Christ-believers practice — triggers a passionate and highly personal letter. The best translation is the NET online.

Galatians 1:6-12

For the next week and a bit, we hear from the letter to the Galatians. Briefly, Paul had preached to the people of Galatia (in modern Turkey) and told them they need not follow the Jewish

Law in all its details. After Paul left, preachers arrived who said they should keep all the law, including circumcision. Paul writes back—in this reading we can see how upset he was, livid, really!

Luke 10:25-37

The message of today’s parable is plain as a pikestaff...and yet we miss it, unless we open our hearts to our neighbour.

Tuesday 4 October

St Francis of Assisi, religious

Galatians 1:13-24

Today we get to hear Paul’s own version of his conversion. The encounter with Christ was foundational for him and his being an apostle was a calling from the risen Lord himself, not some human authority. No one “authorised” him, so he really was independent.

Luke 10:38-42

Real hospitality goes beyond the material and the customary to a real encounter.

Wednesday 5 October

Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14

It may not strike us that eating with the uncircumcised would be a big issue. It was, however. Keeping such rules was seen a key to Jewish identity. Paul has a “go” at Peter, who has acted in a very two-faced, even cowardly way. Paul writes with clarity (if not with charity!).

Luke 11:1-4

When the disciples asked to be taught to pray, they were not looking for a formula of words but a *way* of prayer. Although we treat the Lord’s Prayer as “a” prayer, in reality is a method of prayer.

Thursday 6 October

St Bruno, abbot and priest

Galatians 3:1-5

This is a short but significant passage. The new preachers claimed to have enhanced the faith of the Galatians. Paul asks a penetrating question: did you receive the Spirit before these people came or after? The answer is clear. Just as Paul had his encounter with Christ long before meeting Peter and the others, likewise, the Galatians knew the Spirit before the arrival of those wishing to im-

pose the Law.

Luke 11:5-13

Using ordinary examples and a good dash of humour, Jesus underlines the importance of persistence in prayer.

Friday 7 October

Our Lady of the Rosary

Galatians 3:7-14

Our reading today is one of the most dense and difficult in St Paul’s writings. We bear two things in mind. (1) According to Paul, the promise to Abraham included the future salvation of everyone including Gentiles. (2) “Curse” here means to be outside the blessing of the covenant. Paul is saying that on the cross Jesus, whose ministry was to the excluded and marginalised, himself became one of them by experiencing the cross. By identifying with the outsiders, so to speak, Jesus brought them God’s salvation and so the promise to Abraham was fulfilled. All are saved in Jesus and come to know the love of God.

Luke 11:15-26

In some ways, this is a very distressing Gospel: contemporaries of Jesus were saying that he was in partnership with the forces of evil. On the other hand, the incident gives Jesus these chance to underline the struggle *against* evil in his ministry and in his death and resurrection.

Saturday 8 October

Galatians 3:22-29

Eventually, Paul has to ask a hard question. If some major features of the Law are set aside in Christ and no longer apply to Christians, what was the point of the Law at all? He explains by using an image from everyday experience. In those days, children going to school were accompanied by a slave—called in our translation a guardian—who minded the children until they grew up. Once grown up, the minder is no longer needed.

Luke 11:27-28

Today we have the shortest of all gospel passages — a quick retort of Jesus, taking us to the heart of believing.