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By Pat Bennett

Introduction

At first sight today's Gospel passage is somewhat uncomfortable with its problematic metaphors and two rather irritable-sounding comments from Jesus: the one rather daunting and the other disconcertingly dismissive! Indeed the first of these has all too often been used as a stick with which to beat ourselves and others – "If only I/you had more faith ...I/you would be healed/overcome this difficulty" Such readings however belie the picture of faith which Luke has been sketching in his Gospel. Delving a little deeper helps us to a more textured understanding which can, in turn, give us another useful lens to bring to bear on our way of approaching the challenges of conflict.

Preparation

How might the word faith be defined? Write down some potential definitions then, using a concordance or online search facility, find other instances in Luke's Gospel where Jesus uses the term in his interactions with people he encounters on his journeys. Do these stories add any different dimensions to the definitions you have come up with?

Text

Luke 17:5-10

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

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.

"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'?

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'?

Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

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!'"

Comment

Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem forms the backbone of Luke's Gospel and today's passage comes at the end of the second phase of this narrative arc (Lk 13:22 – 17:10). It is also only a section of the final pericope (17:1–10) which consists of four sayings: the two we don't hear (don't cause others to stumble; forgive and forgive again) and then the two we do which deal with faith and discipleship. At first sight there may not seem to be too much of a connection between all of these; however the disciples' rather desperate plea to Jesus to "increase our faith!" is in fact a response to his direction about repeated forgiveness. The following mustard seed metaphor (delivered – or so the grammar indicates – with a twinge of irritation) seems to point up a basic misunderstanding on the part of the disciples; we could then also read the following verses, with their discomfiting reference to worthless slaves, as an illustrated expansion of what Jesus is trying to get them to understand about faith.

Essentially Jesus turns the question of faith away from an issue of *quantity* – with the implication of a certain quotient being necessary in order for the difficult/spectacular to be achieved – to one of *sufficiency*. He first names the tiny mustard seed; then, out of all the things in the surrounding visual landscape, points towards *this* tree – the sycamine, known for its extensive and dense root system – to complete the metaphor. The hyperbolic contrast thus produced makes the point clear: even the smallest amount of faith is sufficient for what the disciples have been tasked with doing in the service of the Kingdom.

There is an echo here from [last week's passage](#) about the rich man and Lazarus: when the former pleads that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers to amend their ways, Abraham tells him "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them" i.e. they *already have all they need* in order to know how to act properly. Similarly the disciples already have enough faith for what they are required to do – even if this involves multiple acts of forgiveness! In fact it is something they've already experienced when they went out at Jesus' behest without 'purse, bag or sandals' to proclaim the Kingdom ahead of him (Luke 10: 1–12, 17–23).

It also underlines something which Luke unfolds throughout his Gospel narrative, namely that faith is not simply a question of *belief in*, or *certainty about*, it is a matter of *action because* – faith as a *verb* and not just a *noun* one might say. The presence and absence of faith – either implicitly demonstrated or explicitly mentioned by Jesus – is manifested in a variety of different ways in Luke's accounts: a willingness to take risks (5: 1–7); courage and persistence in reaching out across social, cultural, cultic, and physical barriers (5:12–23; 5:17–20; 7:1–10; 8:43–48); love (7:36 –50); praise (17: 15–19); bravery(18: 35–43) etc. In each case it seems the people in question act either for themselves or on behalf of others out of who and where they each are, not because they possess a particular quantity or quality of something abstract. Faith then is not necessarily a matter of something we *have* and where therefore quantity is determinative; rather it is a matter of *lived response to what we know*:

"All you have is what you are and what you give"

as Shevek, the hero of Ursula Le Guin's philosophical SciFi novel *'The Dispossessed'* puts it.

We can see how Jesus' final metaphor might then be a further expansion and amplification of the point rather than a dismissive 'don't expect any thanks!' type comment. We don't need to be running after the extraordinary, we simply need to get on and do that with which *we* have been tasked, that which we know to be the work of the Kingdom as it grows out of the quotidian round of our ordinary, everyday lives. To reiterate a sentiment expressed in Glenn's [reflection last week](#), it is not about 'craving the spectacular' in our walk of discipleship but about getting on with 'the labour of doing prophetic justice' – something which will likely take a different form for each of us.

Thinking about faith and its outworking in this way gives us in turn a helpful lens to bring to bear on our attitudes towards conflict and how we approach it. In just the same way as the disciples did when they were confronted with the direction about forgiveness, we can fall into the trap of thinking that unless we have a certain amount of a particular thing – be that understanding, patience, self-control, or whatever – then we have no chance of doing what seems to be demanded of us in the context of conflict. We might also expect, again as the disciples seem to have done, that the additional quotient of whatever we feel we need will somehow simply fall into our lap if we ask for it! However the challenge is actually to begin where we are, with who we are and what we have, and to work quietly and consistently with that, while seeking to grow and develop in skill and understanding through this experience of lived faithfulness. In the words of the Si Kahn song:

*'It's not just what your born with
it's what you choose to bear;
it's not how large your share is
It's how much you can share.
It's not the fights you dreamed of
It's those you really fought;
It's not what you've been given
It's what you do with what you've got'*

Response

Either

Choose a couple of the Lukan stories of faith mentioned above and reflect on the characteristics of the behaviour commended by Jesus. Is there anything here which could be a guide for you in a situation of conflict?

Or

Reflect on your own behaviour in a recent area of conflict (great or small; public or private). Did you speak and act in a way which was faithful to your current understanding of the Gospel? Or faithful to who you are as a person and how you want to live? If not, why? How might you choose to act differently on a future occasion?

Prayer

Jesus,

You were faithful –
to yourself,
to your task,
to your vision of God's Kingdom –

in the small
daily ordinariness
of embodied humanity

as well as in the
larger
extraordinariness
of incarnated deity.

May we too
be faithful –
wherever we are,
and to whatever
we have been called –

both in the everyday ordinary
and the perhaps
sometimes
extraordinary.

Amen