Luke 17.5-10
5th October 2025

## Living Faith

There was a family holiday moment on a French campsite when Rachel, temporarily, lost all faith in me as a co-parent. Perhaps that statement needs some unpacking!

One sunny afternoon I had one son to look after for a mere half hour, so I took him to the swimming pool. He could swim, just. But that afternoon he was eager to try the flume. *Sure,* I said, *off you go and I’ll film you.*

Well, the truth is I never really did the risk assessment, even mentally. So, with Dad the other side of the pool waving him on, and our son by the flume, wide eyed and excited, I filmed him climbing to the top platform, emerging at the bottom as he was jettisoned, at some speed, into the deep end, coming up above the surface a few seconds later totally dazed and frantically spluttering. It was much more than he bargained for, and all caught on camera by me as incriminating evidence that showed my lack of parental responsibility. There was, thankfully no serious damaged done, and he got out of the pool looking both shocked and elated all at once. Back at the tent he said, *Mum, you must look at this video.* Well, Mum looked, and then she looked at me, and no words were necessary. I sense all faith in me had gone, at least for that evening. Happily, I was given another chance to hone my parenting skills, under supervision from Rachel, the next day.

Moral of the story, I suppose, is never film your mistakes!

If faith in another person can be testing, faith in God can, at times, seem overwhelmingly challenging.

Today’s passage starts with an apostolic request: *Lord, increase our faith.* And as was so often the case Jesus sort of bats it back. In so many ways it’s the wrong request because it implies the issue is simply about quantity. We still hear it today, sometimes shockingly so when people lament a personal tragedy saying: *If only I had more faith, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.*It's significant that those bringing this request to Jesus for their faith to be increased, were already showing a considerable amount, and many in the future would show even more.

Yet, says Jesus, we often make faith harder than it need be, especially if we think it’s all about the amount we have. Instead, in today’s gospel Jesus is much more optimistic about faith, encouraging us with the concept that, even a little can go a long way.

To do that he deems faith as small as a mustard seed to be enough. Of course, this isn’t a scientific formula but a poetic metaphor.

A common Black Mustard seed in Jesus’ day was around 1-2mm yet once germinated could grow into 10-foot bush. In our culture a parallel saying might be *Great oaks from little acorns grow.*And the mustard seed metaphor wasn’t original to Jesus because it was already being widely employed. The Rabbis used it all the time. For example, they described a small, yet important point in the law as being the *size of a mustard seed.* They even invoked the second half of the saying describing a wise teacher who could solve great problems of the law as a *mover of mountains.*Yet, whereas the religious teachers of the day might use it negatively, condemning, for example, a small amount of ritual impurity as being the size of a mustard seed, Jesus uses it entirely positively.

For him it wasn’t about having mountains of faith, but trust and loyalty the size of a seed.

It’s a brilliant use of the image, underlining that possibilities can be turned into reality not because of our great faith in and of itself, but because even a small amount of faith in God’s limitless power can activate the often surprising and transformative energy of love.

Probably all of us feel somewhat faith-less from time to time. And it’s always invidious to start comparing what we think of as our small amount of faith with Mrs Jones’ large deposit of faith two pews down the aisle.

No, no, no, says Jesus. You are using the wrong metric! Don’t be so hard upon yourself. Instead, offer what faith you can muster trusting in God and being loyal to a way of love. Live like that and you too will be surprised and thrilled by what is possible. To have such faith is to see further than the present and to believe in a different sort of future.

Now there is a Part Two attached to this morning’s gospel which, on first reading, sounds a bit clunky and out of place. It’s those verses which speak of a servant’s or, in those days, a slave’s duties.

The Early Church seems to have had a fraught relationship with slavery. It was, to be fair, a remarkable grouping that at least combined slaves and masters. Not a mean feat in those days.

As he speaks in Luke 17 Jesus describes a servant’s duties in such a way that you can imagine his listeners, at least the masters in the audience, nodding their head approvingly. This was what was expected, a servant had a job to do.

Yet, as the passage concludes Jesus pricks the bubble of their superior hubris and likens all his listeners, masters as well as slaves, to servants. We are all in God’s service and we are all called to serve.

It was surely a point well made but what has it possibly got to do with faith, which is the topic placed immediately before.

Well, in one sense it may have nothing to do with it and chapter 17 could be just a selection of disparate sayings with no connecting theme.

Or maybe it’s saying this. That faith, the sort of faith the disciples have been asking for, can find its essential expression not in long and complicated theoretical discussions, but in acts of service, deeds of kindness and the work of love. Faith is both discovered and expressed in action, the action of a servant.

A servant is called to show loyalty, to undertake service and be busy in activity, and a person of faith might take the idea of being God’s servant as their calling to.

Active faith means we don’t just say *here’s a chair, it’s a beautiful chair, an ancient chair or an unusual chair.* Well, I suppose lovers of chairs could talk about them all day long. Active faith means we actually sit on the chair. And in this way faith moves from being a concept to a way of life. Faith isn’t so much about defining as doing. It's faith in God discovered and expressed in a life of loving service and generous compassion.

So, to the apostles’ great question at the beginning asking for an increase in faith – Jesus seems to be advocating that one way to do that is simply to live a life of loving service. It’s in the living that our faith will grow.

I think many people have discovered this. How often do we hear people say, and perhaps you have said or thought it yourself, that for you faith isn’t so much talking but doing. You love to chip in and help out in a charity shop, a parent and toddler group, a church catering team or spring-cleaning day. It’s when faith is lived that it so often comes alive. As love is shared it blesses and isn’t that the essence of our Faith?

The other day I was looking at an old newsreel of Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile in May 1954. Those were such different days with no fanfares or razzamatazz. Just a 25-year-old Oxford medical student running before a crowd of less than 3,000. Later in life he explained how frustrated he’d become when everyone said it was impossible to run a mile in under 4 minutes. He decided such talk had to end so, two years after failing to win a gold medal at the Helsinki Olympics, he ran his heart out and became the first person to run a mile in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds! Someone said the limit wasn’t the body but the mind. And once Roger Bannister broke the 4-minute mile many athletes followed him and today the fastest time stands at 3 minutes 43 seconds.

Living Faith doesn’t accept that the world has to be the way it is. It not only believes it can be different, it strives to make a difference, just like Bannister not only believed his 4 min mile was possible theoretically, but strove to make it a lived reality.

It's never just about believing the faith, it’s about living it.

It was faith that inspired Martin Luther King to march for racial equality.

It was faith that motivated Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, to create an active branch of the church that blended preaching and social care.

It was faith that prompted Bonhoeffer not to stay in American academic security but return to Nazi Germany and lead the Confessing Church to make a stand against Hitler.

It was faith that spoke to Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect to campaign for an end to slavery in the British Empire.

It was in the living out of their faith that all these Christians became true servants of God.

So, maybe the two sections of today’s gospel can be blended – and to put it simply, but challengingly – the way to increase our faith is not just to talk about it, but to live it.

May that be our experience as we remember Jesus’ words that faith even the size of a grain of mustard seed can move mountains. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd October 2025