

OCTOBER 6, 2019 Sunday of the 27th Week of Ordinary Time Year C

Hab 1:2-3; 2,2-4

Ps 95:1-2,6-9 2

Tm 1:6-8,13-14

Lk 17:5-10

Today's Gospel offers a significant account of faith and a brief parable of our role as servants of God. These two different teachings follow in Luke's Gospel a demanding precept from Jesus on sin and forgiveness, and they lead to the story of Jesus' healing of ten lepers. There is no clear, logical connection between the teachings of Jesus in Luke 17, nor between the teachings and the healing story that follows. However, in contemplating the Christian call to mission, we become companions with the disciples (here called apostles) while they implore Jesus: "Increase our faith" (Lk 17:5).

To the request for greater faith (apparently, a holy request for spiritual growth), Jesus responds by making a comparison between two extremes, combining the image of a proverbially small seed, that of mustard, with that of a large tree, the mulberry. Using an original image, he urges us to go beyond ordinary logic, suggesting that faith does not operate according to normal human criteria but rather appears to the incomprehensible human gaze like a mulberry tree in the middle of the sea. Faith, at its base, is profound trust in God and in the ways God works. Perhaps every missionary with some experience has seen the fruits produced by the action of God in circumstances that seemed completely hostile to any result. Today's Gospel challenges us to believe in God beyond the limits of human logic and the sense of the possible, thus becoming one with the mind, the imagination, the logic, and the heart of God.

"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith'" (Lk 17:5-6). Here Saint Luke calls the twelve who Jesus chose at the beginning of his ministry (see Lk 6:12-16) "apostles." The word means "sent." While the other Gospels use this term only once to designate this particular group of disciples of Jesus, Luke uses it six times in his Gospel and twenty-eight times in the Acts of the Apostles. The early Church was aware of the non-transferable privilege of those Twelve; the authenticity of their mandate and their mission was based on the personal

choice of Jesus himself. He chose and sent them. Those apostles are therefore the official witnesses to the Good News of the Risen Lord! And in this sense, they will have to have sufficient faith in him. They are the privileged witnesses of the teachings and miracles of Jesus (see Lk 18:31), and at the same time they are fragile people like all of us, gripped by doubt and lacking in faith (see Lk 24:11,25,38-39). This is the motivation for their prayer addressed to Jesus in today's Gospel: "Increase our faith," in the certainty that he is God.

What does this mean for all of us who are "sent" today? We must humbly recognize that we lack much faith in our mission of evangelization of the world. Perhaps the Lord does not tell us, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to [this] mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Lk 17:6). It is therefore not possible to have faith to move mountains if we lack that essential faith in Jesus the Lord, Jesus risen and living in us his Church. What is the use of wanting to possess a faith that works miracles before the crowds, or powers of healing, or exceptional powers to mystify pagans and Christians of today? Jesus himself worked many, many miracles in the presence of his contemporaries and his apostles, and this did not increase their faith. The essential thing is to have the humility of the apostles to ask the Lord unceasingly to come to their aid. "I do believe, help my unbelief!" This is what the father of the demoniac epileptic of the Gospel cried out (Mk 9:24, see Lk 9:37-43). At each Eucharist, an encounter with the Risen Lord, let us ask him for the faith necessary to meet him in our lives and in our world. Only incessant prayer, the soul of the mission, makes faith possible.

Immediately afterwards (see Lk 17:5-10), the Gospel account of Luke confronts us with a scenario taken from daily domestic life to offer a teaching on the apostolate: however marvellous the results of our work may be, we are simply fulfilling the task assigned to us by God. In everyday life in the time of Jesus, the expectations of master and servant regarding their respective roles are well established. The master commands and the servant carries it out. The servant is expected to move from farm work to household tasks without even taking a break. From the servant there can be no objections like tiredness, hunger, or thirst. Certainly, Jesus' words should not be interpreted as a justification for the economic institution of ancient slavery; he is simply using an ancient social

reality as a metaphor, to suggest a similarity between this reality and our service to God.

When he asks the rhetorical question, “Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded?”, Jesus addresses an audience, including us, from whom an answer – obviously “no” – is expected. Jesus goes on to say that when we have done for God all that has been asked of us, we should say, “We are useless servants; we did what we had to do.” The exaggeration of this image is intended to pedagogically convert the missionary disciple to the logic of faith – not the efficacy and utility of service, but the fruitfulness of faith as communion with Jesus.

Through our own words and through the experience of daily life, Jesus confronts us with the fact that the expectation of reward is disproportionate to reality. What is proportionate, however, is the understanding of who God is and what we owe him. Jesus wants us to recognize that God expects from us a serious and sincere commitment to the work to which God calls us, the mission of making Christ known in the world.

The other two readings of today reflect on these themes of faith and service to God, but from different perspectives. The prophet Habakkuk, writing shortly before the Jewish people were exiled from their native land in the sixth century BC, invokes God’s help in the midst of destruction and violence. In response, the Lord declares that some people feel proud, even though they do not have “integrity,” while “the just one, because of his faith, shall live” (Hab 2:4). Habakkuk insists that, in contrast to those who use violence and cause conflicts, some people trust in God. This is faith, pure and simple; this is what makes them right with God.

When Paul met Jesus, the Risen Lord, the understanding of faith of which Habakkuk speaks was transformed. He came to know the extraordinary ways in which God loved us, the distances God has travelled to bring us back to a right relationship with Him. Paul saw that trust in God’s creative power also works on us, in Christ. It is freedom and faith in our relationship with God that Paul has discovered, and which drive him and every believer after him to go out into the world to make known the good news of God’s regenerating love, to announce the redemptive Easter of Jesus.

Faith's new way of seeing things is centred on Christ. Faith in Christ brings salvation because in him our lives become radically open to a love that precedes us, a love that transforms us from within, acting in us and through us. This is clearly seen in Saint Paul's exegesis of a text from Deuteronomy, an exegesis consonant with the heart of the Old Testament message. Moses tells the people that God's command is neither too high nor too far away. There is no need to say: "Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us?" or "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us?" (Dt 30:11-14). Paul interprets this nearness of God's word in terms of Christ's presence in the Christian. "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)" (Rom 10:6-7). Christ came down to earth and rose from the dead; by his incarnation and resurrection, the Son of God embraced the whole of human life and history, and now dwells in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Faith knows that God has drawn close to us, that Christ has been given to us as a great gift which inwardly transforms us, dwells within us and thus bestows on us the light that illumines the origin and the end of life.

We come to see the difference, then, which faith makes for us. Those who believe are transformed by the love to which they have opened their hearts in faith. By their openness to this offer of primordial love, their lives are enlarged and expanded. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17). The self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth. Here we see the Holy Spirit at work. The Christian can see with the eyes of Jesus and share in his mind, his filial disposition, because he or she shares in his love, which is the Spirit. In the love of Jesus, we receive in a certain way his vision. Without being conformed to him in love, without the presence of the Spirit, it is impossible to confess him as Lord (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). (Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 20-21).