

THE EMMAUS SERIES

27th Sunday Year C

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2: 2-4

2 Timothy 1:6-8; 13-14

Luke 17:5-10

Lord, increase our faith

The teaching of Jesus in today's gospel, in response to the plea of the apostles, has an important lesson for all Christians. It would be unfortunate if the comparisons he uses - very strange to our ears - got in the way, as we listen to him. Black and white affirmations and vivid images were taken for granted by the cultural tradition in which Jesus shared. Perhaps he was near a mulberry tree as he spoke. That a mulberry bush, a fair sized tree with an extensive root system familiar to his audience, should suddenly be re-established in the sea, was clearly an impossibility in the world of ordinary experience. But the point Jesus is making is that those who have 'faith' will know things that are impossible, except to God.

The notion of faith with which we are most familiar - knowing, through the authority of God, truths that would otherwise be beyond our grasp - is sound as far as it goes, but incomplete when compared with what the scriptures tell us about God's gift of faith. The 'faith' that Jesus constantly referred to in the gospels was an openness to the coming of God in the miraculous signs he worked. God has been revealed, as the Scriptures constantly remind us, in the 'great things' God has done. The eternal Son was sent by the Father to bring about the final achievement of all. He 'must suffer' and 'rise again' he tells his companions as they press forward to Jerusalem; he looks forward to his 'hour', John's gospel tells us. Though the mission of Jesus meets with resistance, and his followers are told they must expect the same, 'faith' will be their strength - the openness that recognises - owns, finds new life in - what God has done for the world in the Saviour's Paschal Mystery.

Now the link with the other comparison recalled by Luke in this passage becomes clear. This comparison leaves us uncomfortable, because it refers to the relationship between master and slave that was taken for granted in the world that produced the gospels. Jesus is not approving this system, but he draws a comparison with it to bring out the nature of the relationship with the Lord that the disciple who lives by faith should have. Like the apostles, we are all sent out - given a share in the Saviour's own mission and what God achieves through him. We are reminded, however, that we are no more than God's instruments - whatever has lasting worth for the final kingdom is all God's work. This applies to us all; but it has an obvious importance for those who are called to serve within the Christian community. In the reading from the letter to Timothy, those who have such roles are told, therefore, to 'rely on the power of God' and 'the help of the Holy Spirit'.

The final words of Habakkuk, 'the upright man will live by his faithfulness', had great influence in Christian thought. Paul linked his fundamental principle, 'we are justified by faith', with this text - in his dispute with those who wanted to impose on all the observance of the old Law. Clearly, Paul's principle expresses the mind of Jesus - faith is God's gift, through which we own the new life brought to the world by the Saviour.

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