



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

2nd October 2022

Faith and Hearing God

Luke 17:5-10; Habakkuk 2:1-4

© 2022 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

How often have you wished for more faith? I think we all do often. I think we get frightened by the word 'faith' because it is so important and we feel we fall short.

The last words of that reading from Habakkuk were, "the righteous person will live by his faith ..." It is one of the great faith statements of the Old Testament which Paul used in his argument for justification by faith not works. Another was when God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars of the sky - Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is asked by the apostles to increase their faith. Literally it is "add to our faith." That is significant. It comes from the thinking that faith needs to be accumulated – that it is a question of quantity. But Jesus' answer is that the amount of faith is not critical: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed..."

Do you know how big a mustard seed is? Here is one! – you won't be able to see it. They are 1-2mm in diameter. When I hold it between my fingers you cannot see it because the skin covers over the seed it is that small.

Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea and it will obey you!" Mulberry or sycamore trees are big by the way – they can grow to 15 metres and have a strong root system.

There are parallel passages:

In Matthew 17:20, mustard seed faith would tell a mountain to be moved from one place to another. Mountains in scripture often represent big problems rather than literal mountains.

In Mark 11:23-24, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Jesus set up a huge outcome but kept insisting that a tiny faith can achieve it. It seems that he is saying, you have faith or you don't. Rather like you are awake or asleep or alive or dead. It is not a matter of quantity or size.

Think of learning to swim. You are clinging to the side of the swimming pool anxious about sinking. At some point you let go and started to float and swim. It was not the size of your faith – it was just a decision to trust that the water would hold you up.

It is a common mistake is to direct our attention to the strength of our faith: “Do I have enough faith?” But faith in faith gets us nowhere. It is self-destructive because our faith must be in God and when we start examining our faith, we are putting our trust in our faith. It is like throwing a ball, it goes where you look. When we are no longer focussed on Him and what he has promised our faith drains away because we are trying to use the wrong foundation for it – our feelings about it. Frankly, I try not to think about whether or not I have faith for a prayer because as soon as I go there, I no longer have the faith. I just refuse to go down that path.

I think the best way of thinking about faith is the expression “trust and obey.” That is what faith involves. We trust God and obey him.

Romans 10:17 says, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” The basis for us to have faith is what God communicates to us. We put our trust in his message to us. And we are able to have faith in his message because he is faithful. He is true to his word. Samuel the judge and prophet of Israel said, “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie.”¹ In Revelation, Jesus is given the title, “Faithful and True.” Because he is faithful and true, we can put faith in his words. He does not lie; he is true to his word.

In the reading from the prophet Habakkuk, we have an example of someone seeking God for an answer to a desperate situation and he helpfully tells us how he went about it. I can’t think of any other prophet who let us into his process.

It was around 600BC; he lived in Judah the southern kingdom around Jerusalem. There was corruption and the rule of law was failing due to a king who had abandoned God and his ways. Internationally, a major, new power had arisen - Babylon - which was threatening to conquer all that region. His cry to God in Chapter 1 is similar to a Ukrainian believer crying out to God about invading troops.

But then after his complaint, in chapter 2 Habakkuk prepares himself to hear the Lord’s answer. His description is helpful for us as we learn to hear God better. Remember, perceiving God’s communications to us is the basis for faith. It was when God spoke to Abraham that faith arose in him and God declared him righteous because that faith.

Here, Habakkuk told us how he sought an answer from God:

Habakkuk 2:1-2 I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation ..."

Firstly, he resolved to wait and watch for God’s reply. He uses the language of a watchman, a sentry. A sentry has a quiet role, listening and looking for others. If you want to hear the advancing soldiers or a surprise attack at night, you need to listen carefully and quietly to hear the click of arms or the rattle of a displaced stone.

As Habakkuk stationed himself, he was quietening himself down to be able to hear. As we seek God, we need to quieten down. It is no use coming tense and busy with our minds full of activity, ideas and chatter. That will stop us from hearing the still, small voice of God.

Secondly, Habakkuk said he would watch for what the Lord would say to him. That seems a bit strange: watch for what someone says!

¹ 1 Samuel 15:29

But the principle is to watch – when we want to receive a message from God, after quietening down, we watch for what will come to us. We wait and there may be impressions on the mind's eye.

Thirdly, the Lord spoke to Habakkuk. When God communicates with us, it is usually not dramatic and overpowering. He may do that on special occasions to get a vital message through to us. But most often it sounds just like our own thought voice or looks like our own mental pictures. That is because, the Holy Spirit dwells within us joined to our spirits. So when he speaks to us, he speaks to our spirit and we perceive it as being a thought in our inner being.

Fourthly, the LORD replied, "Write down the revelation..." It is very helpful to write down in a journal whatever you think God may be saying to you. That allows it to be remembered for the future because we do forget shockingly easily. But there is another reason:

If you write down the ideas that come to your mind when seeking God, it allows you to stop critiquing them at the same time. Otherwise, you might have a thought which could be God speaking to you as his loved child and you start thinking, "Is that God? Hmm, I'm sure. It probably isn't. Would he say that to me? Does it fit with scripture?" And now, you have broken the flow of whatever that thought was. It is overwhelmed by your thinking about it rather than receiving it. It is a similar problem to having faith in faith. Our attention is on the wrong thing. By writing it down, you can make the decision not to be critical at the time but to save that for later. Just get the flow of the idea down confident that you can review it safely later without stopping all the time to analyse.

Then later on, you can apply caution and scriptural tests and submit it to a trusted person for review but then you are not stopping the flow.

What follows in chapter 2, is the answer God gave to Habakkuk. What matters right now is the approach he took to hearing God. He quietened himself, he watched inwardly for an answer, he heard words which alighted in his inner being and he wrote them down.

As we close, remember it is not the amount of faith you have but who it is in. It is not about having a large pile of faith in a small God. No! It is about putting your trust in our powerful God!