

Faith

Matthew C. Clarke — Berowra Uniting Church, 7 October 2001

Readings

Ps 37:1–9 Trust in the Lord and do good

Luke 17:5–10 Faith the size of a mustard seed

Prayers

Call To Worship

Welcome to worship this morning. Welcome to those who are new to our church and welcome to those who have worshipped and served here for many years. Our Lord Jesus welcomes all who come to him: young and old, rich and poor, those confident in their beliefs and those with doubts, those who are popular and those who are outcasts, those who need to be comforted and those need to be challenged.

We meet together today to worship the one who is forever faithful to us, to read from the Bible about the qualities of faith and faithfulness, to give thanks, to prayer, and to share each other's pains and joys.

So let us sing together Hymn 42 as we join with all creation in the praise of our Creator.

Prayer of Confession

As we reflect on the words of that Psalm we will spend some time in silence, considering the ways we have fallen short of the ideal in this Psalm.

Lord, there are many things we have done that show we do not always trust you. There are many things we have *not* done that show we have not given ourselves to you. We look jealously at others' prosperity; we seek happiness from all manner of sources other than you, we lack patience and worry needlessly. In doing so we have prevented your sunlight from shining in us and through us.

Lord Jesus Christ, please forgive these failings and enable us to avoid repeating them. Amen.

Hear the word of assurance: that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Offertory

After one church service, a little boy told the pastor, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money."

"Well, thank you," the minister replied, "but why?"

"Because my daddy says you're one of the poorest preachers we've ever had."

That's why I'm going to take up the offering during this next hymn, before I give the sermon: so that what you offer to God won't be at all affected by whether I preach poorly or not!

Let's stand and sing from the overhead 'Have faith in God'.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you that you have blessed us so richly that we have these gifts to share. Take and use them, and us, so that all may know of your love and generosity. In Jesus' name, amen.

Benediction

There is nothing that can happen this week that God has not foreseen, nothing that is outside God's providence. Go faithfully, go lovingly, go hopefully.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God our Father,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and always.

Children's Address

See whether children will jump off a chair to their parents. What about to a stranger?

Jumping like this takes a good deal of trust. That sort of trust – where you actually do something like jump because you believe someone will catch you – that sort of trust is often called faith.

The most important thing about jumping is not how strongly you believe the person will catch you, but whether that person really does catch you. And that depends on whether they are able to catch you and whether they want to catch you. Faith only works if the one you have faith in is trustworthy.

It's good to have faith in your parents. And it's good to have faith in God.

Sermon on Faith

'Make our faith greater'. That's what the apostles asked of Jesus. But how did they understand faith? And what does Jesus' answer to them show of how he conceived of faith?

Faith has many meanings and nuances. I avoid using the term for fear of being misunderstood, because I know that what most people mean by the word is not what I mean by it. This is particularly true among friends outside the church. When they refer to someone as having a lot of faith, I think they often mean that the person has an unquestioned belief in something which is actually quite contrary to the available evidence. But even within the church, I think we misuse the term.

Every good sermon has a good story, so here's my story. It all happened about 15 years ago when I was part of a youth outreach program in Manly called Humptys. Humptys was a sort of beach mission held at the Anglican church hall for the two weeks just after Christmas each year. Our main events were Christian bands playing in a coffee-shop setting each night. There was a lot of professional sound and lighting equipment which had to be set up for these events, and it was during this set up that I had an accident.

I can't remember exactly what it was now, but something more than a little heavy fell on my toe. Being summer, I was only wearing thongs and by the next day my big toe was in agony. It was not only very swollen, but under the toe nail had turned black: a sure sign that the pain wasn't going to go away quickly.

So here I was with an excited group of young Christians eager to bear witness to God and firmly convinced that God was both powerful enough and caring enough to work miracles. Here I was, using my holidays to serve God and now hardly able to walk because of a simple accident. Why would God want to see me in that condition when it prevented me from doing the work I was sure he had called me to do?

So of course we prayed. We prayed that my toe would immediately be healed.

Now what is the role of faith in this situation?

I'm not going to try to give any definition of faith, but will start by pointing out some characteristics of faith:

- Firstly, faith is not believing something you know to be false!
- Faith is not will-power. It is not just hoping or wishful thinking.
- Faith is not something we have (like a possession), but something we do.

- Faith is a quality rather than a quantity. As one person put it “There is no such thing as a little faith any more than there is a little pregnancy.” You are either pregnant or not, and in the same way you either have faith or not.
- Faith is a gift from God. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes that ‘It is by grace that we have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.’ We are saved by God’s grace: not by earning God’s favour, but because of his great generosity. But according to these words by Paul, even the faith to appropriate that grace is given to us by God! We can’t even claim credit for having the faith to believe in God. We can’t take *any* credit for our salvation at all. All the credit goes to God.
- Faith is active rather than passive. Faith which doesn’t lead to action is not faith. In John White’s words, ‘Faith is my response to God’s initiative’. White suggests that Martha exemplifies this when Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus has died (Jh 11:38-41). Jesus asked her to take away the stone which sealed Lazarus tomb. Martha was reluctant, but she had enough faith to do as Jesus asked, in spite of her doubts. The miracle of Lazarus coming back to life did not depend on her feeling of confidence but on her action in response to Jesus’ instructions.

And that leads me to a key understanding of faith that I think our modern usage of the word obscures. In everyday English, the idea of faith is closely associated with the strength of our belief in something. We can make perfect sense of the apostle’s request for Jesus to increase their faith. They wanted to be able to believe more confidently, to trust with fewer questions and doubts.

But the word whose modern usage I think is closer to what Jesus describes in today’s reading is not so much ‘faith’ as ‘faithfulness’.

Part of my reason for thinking that is Jesus’ direct response to the apostles’ request for more faith. By replying that faith as big as a mustard seed is sufficient, he is in effect saying that the *amount* of faith you have is not the issue. It’s not important how firmly convinced you are of something – firm convictions do not make things true. It’s not important how bold and confident you are. It’s not important that you believe without any doubts. It’s not important that you persist in believing even in the face of evidence to the contrary.

Now back to my sore toe at Humptys. There were some good pray-ers in that team and several gathered around to pray for healing. They prayed with confidence that God could heal it (I believed that myself) and that he would heal it (I think I half-believed that, but I certainly hoped with all my heart he would ‘coz it was so unthinkably sore).

After prayer it was just as sore and just as black. Regardless of the evidence, however, two of the prayers declared that I was healed! I was 'healed in the spiritual realm, but just not physically'! That wasn't much comfort to me, and it strikes me that it was a dishonest response, even a fraudulent response. Our prayers of faith had failed. Either God couldn't heal me, or he didn't care enough to. ... Or was there some other surprise yet to come?

If the amount of faith is not important, then what is important about faith?

Jesus continues his response to the apostles' question by seeming to change the topic. He describes the relationship between a master and a servant. After a hard day's work, a servant would not expect to be waited on by the master. No, the master would direct the servant to make dinner and serve it, and then would send the servant away to eat his or her own meal. The servant should not expect any reward for simply doing their duty.

What are we to learn from that about faith?

First, we should not read into this passage an implication that we are worthless. But it does imply that our value is not defined by what we achieve. It debunks the idea that we achieve value by achieving the good, as though we deserve a bonus for being decent, caring human beings. It does not let us play that game. We can't claim: 'You ought to love me, because look at how good I am! Look at what I have done!'

Nor does the passage imply that God is the heartless master who makes demands of us and then ignores us. The whole gospel is about God's invitation for us to take our place at the divine table. It is about a Jesus who washes his disciples' feet and intimates that he is displaying God's character in the process.

Nevertheless, the master-servant relationship emphasises the importance of doing what you're told and of being loyal to the master. The servant acted faithfully. So too, if we are to act in faith, it will mean responding faithfully to God's call.

Now among the Humpty's team there was a girl named Helen whom I had known quite well prior to Humptys. Our friendship was rather strained at that time because we weren't really understanding each other and she felt that I had let her down. We felt uncomfortable with each other because she had been hurt and the issue still hadn't been resolved.

In the middle of the prayer time, I had this thought that God wanted Helen to kiss my toe. What a crazy idea! I didn't think I was hearing him right, so I asked God to repeat it, which he did. What do you do with a thought like that??!! There was no way I was going to say that out loud! So I just kept quiet.

Helen spoke next. She said 'I think God wants me to kiss Matthew's toe!' And so she did! Unbelievable!

It seems to me that there is nothing saner than having faith in God, but sometimes being faithful to God requires us to do some seemingly insane things. It reminds me of that Camry add – Buy a Camry and then do something crazy.

When you think about it, Jesus' example of trees being transplanted into the sea by faith seems pretty crazy, in fact quite comic. But Jesus calls us to do crazy things like that sometimes.

- Think about the mother in her forties who went back to study and completed teacher training so that she could specialise in helping children with learning difficulties. In a large school, she worked with a class of what others used to call the 'dumbos'. Because she actually asked for this difficult class, some teachers treated her like a nutter. But *that* is planting trees in the sea.
- Think about the priest in Africa who faked a crime and got himself imprisoned so that he could minister without any status to those who needed him most. Now that is planting trees in a deep sea! What a crazy thing to do!

What trees does God want you to transplant? Are they circumstances around us that he calls us to have a hand in changing? Are they deeply rooted patterns inside us that he calls us to weed out?

I am aware of some of you in this congregation who have done your share of planting trees in the sea. You tackle the difficult and attempt things whose success seems improbable. Sometimes you appear to succeed, often you appear to fail.

At Humptys, Helen was faithful. She dared to do something crazy because she heard God calling her to do it. After she kissed my toe, do you know what happened? My toe was as sore and black as it was before. BUT, my relationship with Helen was healed. We soon resolved the issues which had caused the conflict between us and forged a friendship which has continued to be significant source of spiritual inspiration to us both ever since.

What's more, I believe God used that experience in both our lives to lead us forward in our faith. There is great truth in the idea that to be faithful in big things you must first be faithful in small things. Doing crazy things because you believe God asks it, even when the issue seems insignificant and despite the risk of failure or embarrassment, builds in you the sort of character that truly reflects the grace of God.

I am convinced that when we act in response to God's initiative, what appears like a waste of time is always a success. It is not our abilities which are important to God, but our availability. Our value is not calculated by our

achievements. It is not the size of our faith which matters, but whether we are faithful.

Bannerman – Steve Taylor

One man's grinning from behind the nets, waits 'til the camera's adjusted.

Don't you worry 'bout the flak you'll get? Aren't you scared of getting busted?

The ball gets booted, it hits the crossbeam, up goes a banner – John 3:16.

He don't worry 'bout the critics (They tow the line)

He don't worry 'bout the cynics (They live to whine)

He ain't gonna change the world, but he knows who can.

Bannerman.

Prime time football in the Buffalo snow, freezing his little epidermis.
Lifts that banner at the first field goal, drinks clam chowder from a thermos.

He's never missed a game, he never spells it wrong, he never talks back when they tell him 'Move along'.

He don't worry 'bout the critics (They'll howl for days)

He don't worry 'bout the cynics (They navel-gaze)

He ain't gonna change the world but he knows who can.

Bannerman.

Sports fans everywhere dying for a drink, but they gotta find the well first.

One man's ready with a banner and a wink. A whole lotta fans are getting well-versed.

Every time I see him I smile a little more. I can't help praying for another high score.

He don't worry 'bout the critics (They'll howl for days)

He don't worry 'bout the cynics (They navel-gaze)

He ain't gonna change the world, but he knows who can.

Bannerman.

He don't worry 'bout the critics (They've met their match)

He don't worry 'bout the cynics (They sniff and scratch)

He ain't gonna change the world, but he knows who can.

Questions:

Do you know anyone like this
bannerman?

How do you react when you see someone
doing something weird in the name of
God?

Have you ever done anything like that? If
so, do you think it achieved anything?

Morning Service Structure

Call to Worship

Hymn: *From all who dwell below the skies* (AHB 42)

Children's story

News and Thanksgiving

Responsive Reading of Psalm 37:1–10

Prayer of Confession

Hymn and offering: *Have faith in God*

Reading 2: Luke:17:5–10

Sermon – Faith and Faithfulness

Hymn: *Give me the faith*

Intercession

Hymn: *Come, dearest Lord* (AHB 357) – Four part round

Benediction

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Evening Service Structure – Café Church

Welcome and Introduction

Brainstorm: What is faith?

1. What do people mean when they say:
 - Sue belongs to the Christian faith
 - I have absolute faith in the Australian legal system
 - His faith brought him through
 - I wish I could have as much faith as Jim, but I guess I ask too many questions
2. What do *you* think it means to have faith?
3. What would you say to someone who asked how they could have more faith?

Reading: Luke 17:5–10

Commentary

Excerpts marked in **yellow** from the sermon.

Offering

Bannerman: Song and discussion

Include my high school story about writing a letter at God's prompting to an address he gave me.

Write your own paraphrase of Luke 17:5–10

Here is my attempt, written during the service:

Jesus' mates asked him to give them more faith. But Jesus told them that they didn't need any more faith. "If you have any faith at all", he said, "even the trees would do what you told them to. The important thing is not how much faith you have but whether what you are trying to achieve is in line with what God wants you to do. It's like the relationship between a master and a servant: a faithful servant is one who does what the master says. You don't need more faith, just be more faithful."

Closing thoughts

Excerpts marked in **green** from the sermon.