

27TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C

On first reading, the words of Jesus today sound particularly harsh. All the disciples seem to be asking for, is more of what Jesus calls all of us to in the first place, namely, to have faith in God.

So why is it that he seems to criticise them for their lack of faith, suggesting that even faith the size of the tiny mustard seed would dwarf theirs? And then going further by instructing them to consider any service they do in God's name, as no more than that of a servant doing their duty.

How are we to make sense of this?

The answer, I suggest, lies in the tone used by the Apostles, "Increase our faith." It is not clear from the plain text whether the Apostles are imploring Jesus to do so, or instructing him to. Their words sound nothing like those spoken by the man who begged Jesus to heal his son, recorded for us in Mark's gospel,

"Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9: 23-24)

The words of the Apostles today, I would suggest, have an air of presumption or even brashness about them. It is as if the Apostles consider themselves to already possess a good measure of faith, but would welcome even more of it. Jesus' response therefore is to bring them back down to earth with a rather dramatic bump.

Secondly, the apostles seem to be asking Jesus to do the work of growing their faith for them. To wave a magic wand and make their faith grow. The truth is that it is not that easy. Faith, is intimately connected to our free will. It is our own free choice. We cannot be forced to believe, to trust in someone, any more than we can be forced to love them.

God, of course loves us infinitely and so he supplies us with all of the grace we need for faith to grow, but he does not impose faith upon us. To impose faith on us would be to infringe

upon our freedom to choose. We have to choose God; we have to choose to believe in God and to trust God.

Jesus calmed storms and multiplied loaves in order to encourage us to have faith, but he does not impose faith on us. In the Gospel of Matthew, (Matthew 13:58,) we see that, on occasion, Jesus was unable to work many miracles because of a lack of faith among the people. We are reminded again of Jesus' words to the man pleading for his son to be healed. "If you are able! (Jesus said)—All things can be done for the one who believes." (Mark 9:23)

God sows the seed of faith in us, at the moment of our conception. He nurtures it through his sacraments, through his word, and through the sisters and brothers he gives us in our Church, but we must actively cooperate with his grace if faith is to grow.

We see evidence that the seed of faith has planted in us by God, in the natures of young children. Young children instinctively trust in the goodness of their earthly parents, they believe in them and it is this belief that can grow into belief in their eternal father. We also see evidence for the seed of faith in the openness that children display, to believing in things they cannot see. This simple wonder can grow into the awe and wonder we experience in our faith. These are God given capacities, given to our children so that as parents we can help them to recognise and have faith and trust in God.

Jesus does not give the Apostles greater faith, but he does point the way, and the way he points to is that of humble service.

This is why Jesus chooses the example of the servant who recognises his service as simply doing his duty. This is a humble path that sacrifices our ego and our pride, in the service of God. It makes us small and insignificant, so that God is magnified.

Humility enriches the soil of our souls, so that the seed of faith that God has planted in us, can grow, laying down deep roots within us. These roots will both sustain and strengthen our faith, enabling us to stand firm in the face of any storm life sends our way.

This humble path is the one that Jesus followed himself, even though he is the Son of God (Philippians 2:6-11,) and it is the path he sets before us today.

