

Mustard seed faith

Lamentations 1:1-6; Luke 17:5-10

During my travels in 2017-18 I visited the southwest of Scotland. I visited the village of Ruthwell, not far from Dumfries. In the parish church there is an elaborately carved C8th Anglo-Saxon cross, placed in the C19th in a specially built part of the church by the then minister, Henry Duncan.

Mr Duncan has another claim to fame. In 1810 he established the first savings bank in the world, the Ruthwell Parish Bank. He was concerned by the dire poverty of his parishioners and aimed to encourage saving amongst the ordinary people to save them from the degradation of having to go into the poor house. Members and customers of the bank could deposit between 1 shilling and £10, and they were paid interest and bonuses. The savings were placed on loan with a commercial bank to earn interest. The bank operated from the local school room every Saturday from 7 to 8 in the evening.

From this tiniest of seeds the savings bank idea spread across the country. It took time, it wasn't always straightforward, but from that tiny seed, meeting a very specific need around poverty and dignity, it made a huge difference to millions of people.

Jesus was speaking to His friends about the challenges of life and faith. Just before this passage He was telling them that as we go through life, we will often stumble, we will often get things wrong. A way to get yourself back up on your feet is to believe that you *will* get better, life *will* get better, and that faith helps. No wonder the apostles pleaded, "Increase our faith!"

There are big things out there in our world that need fixing. The economic crisis that affects more than our country but is being felt particularly painfully here. The megalomaniac imperialism of Vladimir Putin and what he is attempting to do to Ukraine. The daily erosion of the climate of our

planet, which we all know needs addressing seriously, yet we allow to slip, and put off. The future of our Church, and the shape and form it is going to take in the years that lie ahead. "Increase our faith!" we might be tempted to demand. We need big handfuls and heartfuls of faith to sort out the huge mess our world is undoubtedly in.

What does Jesus say?

"If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed..." then you could rearrange every landscape. It's not the quantity of your faith that matters, it's the quality. In life we don't need too much faith, we need just enough. We need just enough faith to get through and make the changes in the lives of those around us, in the life of the world, and in our own lives.

Some of life seems to me to be a coming to terms with what we can't change and how we learn to live with that. That's the story of the Book of Lamentations. Sometimes life *is* hard and there is no magic formula that will change it. Sometimes there are no answers; sometimes there are no neat conclusions. We always try to bring order to the chaotic, and sometimes that is not possible. A friend of mine said the other week, if you can't make it happy, make it beautiful. If it is beyond you, not because of a lack of faith, but because some things can't be fixed then how can you learn to live with it and work out what it is that you might be able to change. Not to give up hope about everything, but to work towards something where you know you will be able to make a little difference, maybe a big difference.

Do you know the person who with very limited resources has been able to do big things? The person who doesn't want to change the whole world, but just a little bit of it. With their mustard seed faith they use that faith to plant something, grow something, develop something, be something that works, with God, the transformation needed.

Who doesn't want to end world poverty? Who *does* volunteer to help at a foodbank, or a clothing store? Who doesn't want to do something about the epidemic of loneliness in the C21st? Who *does* go through to the church hall for coffee and sit not beside the people they know all the time, but the person they don't, and strike up the simplest of conversations. Who doesn't want to see the Church be busier, more welcoming, more dynamic? Who *does* attend, weekly, and play some part?

I'm all for aspiration, and blue-sky thinking, and dreaming big dreams, but I'm also for achievability, and sustainability, in the Church, in politics and economics, in the community, and in the world.

It takes mustard seed faith. Not magic, but mustard seed faith. It needs to be used, not hidden away, not saved for a rainy day. Not nervously protected in case it runs out. But used, so that something might grow.

When it comes to whatever it is in life that you think, 'that needs changing, how might that change?' it's going to be the little steps, not the big leaps, that will matter. It's going to be the small attitude change, not the grand gesture, that will make the lasting impression, more often than not.

Recently I was reminded of the Serenity Prayer, I'm sure you'll know it:

God, grant me the Serenity

To accept the things I cannot change...

Courage to change the things I can,

And Wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,

Enjoying one moment at a time...

It is maybe too cute and too tidy for some. It's maybe too defeatist and too limiting for others, but it speaks to me in the same tone of voice as Jesus and His mustard seed faith. Know the difference between what is possible, and what is not, but then do something about it, not with what you don't have, but with what you do have.

Great things have been done by people who believed a big dream, and with a big faith, pursued it with everything in them. But it's often the mustard seed faith people, extraordinary in their ordinariness, who never saw themselves as special, but who resolved to do something.

"One thinks of Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement (in America) grounded in the churches; nonviolent protesters confronting armed police, dogs, water hoses, and crowds threatening violence in defence of racial segregation; of Archbishop Desmond Tutu confronting the full power of the (South African state) in opposing the terrible racism of apartheid; of crowds streaming out of their churches, holding candles, singing hymns, in Leipzig and Dresden and East Berlin in defiance of the Communist government (of East Germany) as the regime was tottering and falling."ⁱ One sees the protests of women in Iran today, against the brutality of a regime whose morality police punishes women who do not conform to rules about covering their hair. Maybe we will see it not so much in Ukraine but in the streets of Russia, where people have had enough of a war-mongering regime that has lost its way.

These are all little seeds that grow into something bigger. But the active faith of mustard seed is as potent in the small ways of our daily living. In relationships where trust has broken down. In families where dysfunction causes harm. In a workplace where the burden lies on a few and not the many in a team. In a church, where the possibilities of the future are hidden behind a resistance to changing what belongs in the past.

Mustard seed faith. Let me be honest, not everything can be changed at the moment, in life, in work, in the church. That's not a sign of weakness, or faithlessness, but perhaps a sign that the time is not quite yet. We need the insight, and the hopefulness, to see what might be done, and can be done, so that it will be done.

Jesus and the mustard seed story isn't one about, 'How much faith is enough?' It is one that is about, "What is faith for?" Might it be the case that we already have the faith we need, and we are being called to fulfil faith's purpose, and to live it?

We need encouragement. We need help. We need a reminder. We need communion. To show us how the mustard seed of faith that was the life of Jesus, from the smallest and most unlikely of beginnings in a faraway place and in a long-ago time, took root, and grew, and changed EVERYTHING!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

¹John M Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol4 p143