

Year C Proper 22

Luke 17:5-10

I defy anyone to listen to the passage being read from Luke's Gospel this morning without wincing. It is possible for a preacher to go seriously wrong with this text and to do so confidently. The text is so sure of itself and therefore it so easy to go with it. Preach it brother; let it speak for itself; let the plain meaning of Scripture be heard. The plain meaning of Scripture - that phrase, when I hear it, causes me to tighten up inside because in recent times it has so often been

the prelude to an abusive interpretation of God's word. The latter part of this passage in Luke has been used, as the plain meaning of Scripture, to instruct slaves to view themselves as worthless. How does that sound to you? Can you picture the Confederate preacher in the 1840s preaching to his mixed congregation and lifting his head at the relevant moment to address the underlings gathered before him? Can you picture this teaching being widened just a wee bit to include ethnic or racial groups, or maybe even women, in the worthless category? Well, I'm sure you can because

lamentably this text has been preached that way before. Isn't it amazing how some passages of Scripture are latched onto as proof texts for oppression? The little voice at the back of the room asking how all of this fits with the ministry of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom is shouted down. The plain meaning of Scripture must be heard.

So what is happening here? Was Jesus really mocking their lack of faith as not as substantial as a mustard seed? Was Jesus telling them all what he really felt about them? That, in his eyes, they were all

worthless. Of course not: Jesus loved them so much he was about to give his life for them. As far as he was concerned their lives were worth more than his! Care needs to be taken as we seek to understand. As always the context is crucial and the key to unlocking the meaning of the passage is found with reference to the context. The apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. This was not a general request that came out of nowhere. It came from the fact that Jesus had just told them that they had to be careful that they didn't lead anyone else astray by careless actions and that if

someone wrongs them that they must forgive that person continually if forgiveness is sought. In response to that the apostles asked for more faith! How could we live with these implications and how could we live with a compliant heart without more faith? Then Jesus spoke about faith the size of a mustard seed.

I read the following recently from an article about emails and their tone.

“Email, especially in the workplace, has become the default mode of communication for many people. It’s quick, efficient, and

one doesn't have to engage in live, real-time emotional responses to the message.

While the splendid isolation from immediate emotional reactions may be a comfort for some, it eliminates the most valuable information of any conversation. In face-to-face communication, we rely heavily on non-verbal information like facial expression, body posture, gestures, and voice tone to interpret and predict other people's behaviour.

Without these important non-verbal cues, our imaginations fill in the blanks of what the person sending the message intended,

and how they felt about the communication. We rarely fill in the blanks with positive intentions. This can lead to misunderstanding, damaged relationships, and poor business decisions.

Given that many of us must communicate via email and text, we should be aware of the fact that emails can have a “tone.” People will remember the emotional tone of an email more vividly and longer than the content.”¹

Now, this issue of the awareness of perceived tone is important in all forms of written communication and not just emails. If we

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/threat-management/201311/dont-type-me-email-and-emotions>

are not aware that there may be an issue over how we are reading a passage of Scripture, then we are in danger of misreading it. If it is true that we rarely fill in the blanks with positive interpretations then we are in danger of reading positive or neutral passages negatively. Here, in my view, we have a fine example from Scripture. All of us, no doubt, are inclined to read Jesus' comments about faith as small as a mustard seed negatively, despite the fact that there is no explicit negative comment made by Jesus. We tend to fill the gaps in by assuming that Jesus was responding to their

request for more faith by mocking their pathetic efforts. Why? - there is no indication in the text that his tone is negative. In fact, I would like to suggest to you that Jesus was encouraging them to think again about their request for more faith. It's not more faith that you need. You don't need to believe all the more. You don't need to conjure up greater depths of faith concentration. No, you need to listen to me and you need to live in response. Watch your conduct and then others will not be led astray. Keep on forgiving despite the fact that you are being let down. Don't look to

yourself and your faith or your pride will trump you. Look to me and I will give you the strength to keep on forgiving. Furthermore don't look to your own benefits or gains from following me. Don't look for your account to be credited now. Life is not about totting up the brownie points and shining up the gold stars! You will get nowhere looking after these things. Instead content yourself with faithful loyalty to your master, Jesus, and in the doing of your duty you will find fulfilment.

Scott Higgins tells the story of a family visit to the Gold Coast:

“In November 2000 my wife, my kids and I took a holiday to the Gold Coast. About 600kms north we were driving up a big hill, knowing that Byron Bay was down the other side. We were looking forward to it. We’d been in the car for a long time, it was hot, and we were eagerly anticipating a break. So up the hill we came, knowing that our break was down the other side. And then we saw it – the most breathtaking view you’re ever likely to encounter. At the top of the hill we got the most breathtaking view of a lush green valley stretching away to the deep blue of the ocean.

There was a lookout at the top of the hill, so we stopped, jumped out of the car and stood looking. The kids figured they'd reached the top of the world, so they danced on a little stone wall singing, "We're on top the world, we're on top of the world." Over and over, "we're on top of the world, we're on top of the world."

And in some ways it really felt like it – it was one of those perfect moments frozen in time. The kids singing and dancing, the wind fresh on the face, the sun shining above us, the road we'd travelled stretching out behind us, the road to come winding its way ahead. We

knew who we were, where we'd come from, where we were going.

If you think of life as a journey, most of us would like to sit at the top of the world, to have one of those perfect moments where it all comes together and make sense, where we can look back at where we've come from and look ahead and know where we're going, to have a sense of what is out there waiting for us, to see the detours and potholes and danger points that lie out there and start planning how we'll meet them.

But instead of sitting at the top we spend most of our time travelling on either side of

the hill. God sits at the top, has a sense of how it all fits together, but we usually don't get that view. We get surprised by potholes and detours and danger spots and have to struggle our way through them. Faith however reminds us that God is at the top of the hill, and that even in the roughest parts we can live with trust in him to guide us through."²

That's what this little passage in Luke's Gospel is all about. It's not about Jesus laying in to the apostles about their lack of faith. It's not about Jesus putting them in

² <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/obedience/>

their place because they were getting above themselves. We have a lesson this morning in listening to the Scriptures so that what we hear does not pull us down but instead lifts us and edifies us. May we receive God's encouragement this morning.