

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY – C October 7, 2007

One of the most necessary and most obvious components of Christian spirituality is faith. Sometimes we hear the word *faith* tossed around so much it begins to lose its full meaning. If we want a definition of faith we could say it means considering something to be true, and therefore worthy of our trust.

Faith is one of the three virtues we call *theological* virtues, the other two being hope and love. We call them theological because they are the primary ways we relate to God. Since we cannot see God physically our relationship with him can only be through our faith, our hope, and our love.

When the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith, what they wanted was a deeper trust in God and in Jesus as their teacher. The kind of faith they needed most—and that we need, too—was faith like that of Abraham, our “Father in Faith”, who, as we learn in the OT, set out on a journey to the promised land with little knowledge of what he was getting himself into.

Imagine this happening to any of us today, to head out on a long journey, without really knowing where we’re going. Abraham, being a man, probably would not ask for directions, and as for the rest of us, we’d buy a GPS, look up MapQuest on the internet, go to the AAA, especially if you’re geographically challenged like me. Anyway, here’s Abraham, trusting completely in God’s goodness, knowing God would be faithful to him and show him the way, just as he had promised.

Today’s OT reading can help us grasp the idea of faith, at least as it was understood in biblical times. The prophet Habakkuk, who is writing just before the Babylonians invaded—and later destroyed—Jerusalem and sent the Israelite people into exile, is told that “the just man, because of his faith, shall live.” Although many of the people during the exile would give up in despair and abandon their faith in God, Habakkuk knew that those who remained *faithful* would survive the approaching disaster.

In our Gospel today we are given a teaching by Jesus at the end of a long journey with his apostles. Along the way he has been instructing them about the kingdom of God and about himself and what it means to follow him. And we see that being a follower of Jesus is no easy task, because the demands are building up.

Here Jesus warns against giving scandal and causing others to sin, and he urges us to correct those who sin. This is called fraternal correction, and it’s a serious obligation that we have, to correct someone who is clearly going down the wrong moral path. But this can only be done in a true spirit of love and respect, not harshly or in a cruel or self-righteous manner. We are also expected to forgive, repeatedly, those who sin against us.

Wow, this is hard work, this Christianity stuff! How can we do this? How can we live up to these demands? Well, we might look at those first followers of Jesus and see how *they* did it. To carry out all these heavy demands they needed to recognize the need for even greater faith than they had when they first decided to follow Jesus. This is why they ask him to increase their faith.

In response to their request, Jesus gives them a very short parable—actually more of a saying—that clearly points out how helpful even a small bit of faith will be. The amount of faith equal to a tiny mustard seed is enough to uproot trees. Well, imagine what a *lot* of faith will do!

Now, if we back up for just a moment and take a look at our second reading we see that St. Paul, the wise and experienced apostle, is now in prison because of his uncompromising preaching of the Gospel. He is writing to his younger friend and co-worker, Timothy, and giving him instructions on how to carry on their work.

He says that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God was present in a special way, and through this presence, God has made available to *all* of us the possibility of a right relationship with God, which St. Paul calls *justification*.

But there's one thing missing here, and that's our response. We respond not only by the way we live our lives, but also each time we recite the Creed, like we do at every Sunday Mass, we are proclaiming what we believe in. Christians have done this for 20 centuries, and we still do it today.

But just in case the apostles thought they were doing something spectacular or heroic, Jesus tells another parable, one about a master and a servant. There are a number of parables like this in St. Luke's Gospel, and in almost all of them God is the master and we are the servants. But in this one, we are invited to turn it around and identify with the master.

Suppose you hired someone to paint your house or mow your lawn. After they finished their job, would you be expected to serve them dinner or effusively praise their work? Of course not, because they are fulfilling their contract and doing only what you had paid them to do.

And so it is with us. As difficult as it may be for us to accept, we have certain obligations as Christians, as Catholic Christians, and we are expected to fulfill those obligations and, believe it or not, not get anything extra for it!

This parable—in fact this whole Gospel today—is a wonderful lesson in humility. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be God's humble and faithful servants, and nothing less.