

27th Sun [C] 2013

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Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10

During the last sixty or seventy years there has been among us a tremendous loss in our willingness to trust others. Beginning with the Vietnam War and immediately thereafter with Watergate, our confidence and faith in our governmental leaders has demonstrably diminished. The huge increases in divorce are symptomatic of our general loss of trust in others. It was once believed that science and technology would make our world a better place, and education was supposed to be the key to making us better people. Education was supposed to cause us to respect others and treat others better than had been the case in past human history. But they all have failed us; we don't trust them much any more to improve our human lot.

Presently we find ourselves with diminishing faith in our political institutions. Both the Congress and the Presidency are at all-time lows in terms of polls measuring the confidence that American voters have in them. In recent years there has been a crisis of faith in our Church leaders although that seems to be turning around due to the leadership of Pope Francis. Everywhere we hear of elevating hopes because of Pope Francis and his vision. Truly he is a good father figure for all Catholics... and some non-Catholics as well.

Then there is the faith required for successful human relations. Our everyday dealings with others depend on trust. Unfortunately, people betray that trust, either by momentary weakness, or by premeditated deception, or when they run hidden agendas on us. The corporate scandals of recent years show us that humans can deceive in monstrous ways. Because of such sad experiences, as we grow older, we become more circumspect and tend to have only a few really close friends. If we are not to wind up completely isolated we need to deliberately cultivate trust and refuse to abandon faith in others and have greater faith in God's providence.

The prophet Habakkuk lived about 600 years before Christ, around the time of the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem. The Jews were in desperate shape, threatened by their enemies and falling apart internally. Their moral fiber was unraveling. Corruption beset them. Their religious practices had diminished to the point where they were only empty and formal rites which they merely externally observed. Spiritually they were in near collapse.

Habakkuk had the temerity to call God into an accounting, crying out:

*How long, Lord, must I call for help,*

*but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you do not save?  
Why do you make me look at injustice?  
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
there is strife, and conflict abounds.  
Therefore the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never prevails.  
The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted.*

How many of us have heard those words in our own day? How many of us have heard them whispered in our own hearts and souls?

If we mature enough spiritually to cast cynicism aside, if we reject constant mistrust of others, and if we throw away our perpetual attitudes of disbelief, life will quickly change for us. We will begin to see others, reality and life in a whole new way. Light will enter into our dark world. We will have moved mountains, the mountains of darkness that smother our hearts and souls.

One of the wonderful gifts that comes with being a priest is the continual encounters we priests have with people of faith. Many times I go into a home or into a hospital room where a person is dying. You might think that this would be a terrible scene, something very difficult to do. Usually, however, it is not. People of faith, in the midst of tears, are most often ready to let go and trust God to care for their loved ones. Many times the dying person himself or herself has such a deep faith that he or she radiates a peace in what would otherwise be empty despair and paralyzing fear of death. Many a priest realizes that he is among people whose service to the Lord is so strong that they serve the Lord even in crises, particularly in their own personal sufferings and crises. So often I realize that these same people have spent their lives saying their prayers, performing acts of Christian charity, coming to Mass, and receiving the Sacraments and living beautiful lives in their confidence and their faith in God. Their faith life is so strong in their daily lives that it is their sure support in all of their times of crises.

Let's you and I now stand in the shoes of the apostles who in today's gospel account said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." And let's also hear Him say to us "If your faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." In other words Jesus is telling them, "Don't let yourselves off the hook! You have plenty of faith to accomplish all I ask." This text is often misinterpreted as meaning, "O ye of little faith!" as a put-down of the disciples for

not even having the faith of a tiny seed. On the contrary! The disciples are suggesting that God needs to give them more faith. Jesus tells them that they have plenty of faith already. The text of the original Greek is clear that the sense of the “if” clause is the one that implies that the situation is already true. “If you have faith – and you DO!” is its meaning. It takes a faith just the size of the teensiest mustard seed to move aside mountains of cynicism and despair. Jesus is telling us, “You have plenty of faith to accomplish all I ask, so stop making excuses for yourselves.”

Today we need to take hold of the truth that we do have faith and that if we dare to use it we can change our lives. He’s telling us that we really don’t need more faith, we simply have it; it’s God’s gift to us and we should rely on it. If we do, we will be useful and productive.

If Republicans and Democrats recover faith in each other’s best intentions and if the President and the Congress do likewise, then there are no limits to the mountains they can move and to what they can accomplish. Do we believe in ourselves and in God, or do we rely only on our own power and our own politics?

*My sisters and brothers in Christ,*

The words of the Lord in the Gospel today put us on the alert: we are here to serve God. This is not something onerous because this is a God who always loves us. On the other hand, He wants us to listen to Him and to understand His love and His way of living in this life. So often we only want our way of living and then we try to justify it somehow in our relationship with God.

The first reading today, from the Prophet Habakkuk, reminds us also that this world belong to the Lord. He will have His way. This can sound scary and many of us have heard the words of the Lord used to scare us. Yet ultimately, it is the Lord begging us to listen to Him so that we can know the way of peace and walk on the road of salvation.

The Second Letter to Timothy tells us that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. In our lives, sometimes we want only free to love and we want a freedom so that all of our actions will be right without us having to work at them. The author of this letter reminds us that we must bear our share of hardship for the gospel. We who have come to know the Lord also know that His way of life for us is filled with joy--but requires power and love and self-control.

Unless we have a deep and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, probably not much in these readings will touch us. Only if we have come to know the Lord and His love for us are we able to take up the strong task of living His words and walking in His path. This is not because He wants us to suffer but because to live the divine life means that we must recognize in ourselves what is not divine and begin the work of allowing the Lord to transform us. That is difficult work indeed!

Both the first reading and the gospel speak of the necessity of faith! Habakkuk tells us that the just one will live by faith. Surely this sounds so easy! Once we set out on the path, however, we begin to realize how difficult it is to live by faith in every circumstance, seeking only what God wants, seeking only to walk in the way of the Lord.

Yet there is always cause for rejoicing because Jesus promises to be with us in every circumstance of our life. Too often we forget to be still in His presence and ask His Spirit and to rejoice in His love. All it takes is to be still in His presence. We need do nothing more except be aware that there is a God and that He loves us. He loves us in Jesus Christ!

Let us pray this Sunday with the apostles: Lord, increase our faith! Let us know Your love and we shall be saved!

## 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C

Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4; 2Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10

Being a Christian is a scary business. Jesus made this plain to would-be disciples. He warned them of obstacles which would be sure to come – and then went on to warn them of something even worse – *providing* them.

*Alas for the one who provides them! It would be better for him to be thrown into the Sea with a millstone put round his neck* (Lk 17:1)... . Scary business indeed!

Jesus asks so much of disciples; how can we even dream of being what he wants?

*If your brother does something wrong, reprove him.* Who among us is strong enough and wise enough to do that? How many of us when we see someone doing something wrong, especially someone in the Christian community, has the courage to meet with him alone and gently reprove him? And having done it once or twice, how many of us make it a habit of life to do so?

And then: *if he is sorry, forgive him.* How hard is that - to forgive ... from the heart?

But wait, there's more: *And if he wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I am sorry', you must forgive him.* Jesus really lays it on, doesn't he? How could he expect anyone to do such heroic things?

No wonder his apostles (note the plural) say: *Lord, increase our faith.* They may still have a lot to learn but by this time they must have understood that the demands of discipleship cannot be accomplished by

mere willpower or intelligence or skill, or any other talent. They know it requires *faith*, and they ask for an increase of it. And here is where it gets interesting.

The Lord replies: *Were your faith the size of a mustard seed... .*

Strangely, I once found myself resisting one of the charismatic ladies in a former parish who asked to run yet another Holy Spirit Seminar. We had only just completed one and now, already, she wanted another? That would have made about three in the last year. ‘Yes, Father,’ she said, ‘You can’t get enough of the Holy Spirit!’

Well, that sounds OK if you don’t think about it too deeply, but it does pose the question: *Does the Holy Spirit come in amounts?* And this is precisely the problem the Lord had with the apostles who seemed to be quantifying faith – so you could have a small amount of it or a larger amount of it.

The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit, and where the Holy Spirit is present, well, he is present. He can’t be a ‘little bit’ present; just as a woman can’t be a ‘little bit’ pregnant. Of course we can surrender to a greater or lesser degree to the Holy Spirit’s presence within us and give him greater and greater sovereignty over us but then we would have to be careful when we express this sovereignty in words such as: the Holy Spirit is *growing* within us; when the reality is that we are growing in the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that this is why, when the apostles said *increase our faith*, Jesus took them immediately out of the area of *quantity*, and brought them to the smallest seed he could think of, the mustard seed.

Jesus could have said, for example: If your faith were the size of a *grain of sand*, or a *speck of dust*, but the point of the comparison with the mustard seed is that it is *living*; it has a *living* power which a grain of sand does not.

Just as a small weed can split a slab of concrete, or a mustard seed can produce a huge tree in which the birds of the air find shelter, so the living power of faith can move mountains.

The secret of the living power which faith has is that it is built on the living word of God. *The word of God is something alive and active*, says Hebrews. The power of this living word is transferred to us in the gift of faith and our ‘faith journey’ is, in truth, defined by the extent to which we surrender to the power of God’s word in us.

We, who have received this gift of living faith in God’s Word, have a responsibility for its growth in us, or more precisely, *we have a responsibility to grow in this gift of faith.*

In the late 1990's, CNN, the American news channel, ran an ad in the print media that made a deep impression on me: not necessarily to watch CNN – which, of course, I do sometimes, but about the spirituality of daily life. The two page ad had this large truck in the foreground which was on fire. At one of the corners of the photograph there was this elderly person who was throwing a bucket of water on the blazing truck in an attempt to put off the fire. And the caption read: “*History is not made by kings and presidents; but by ordinary people doing extraordinary things.*”

The Liturgy of the Word on this 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time invites us to reflect on the sacredness of our daily lives. It calls us to find God in our faithfulness to daily duties. The readings invite us to live by faith.

The first reading is from Prophet Habakkuk (1:2-3; 2:2-4). This book was written during a very difficult time in the history of Israel (7<sup>th</sup> Cent BC), just before the Babylonian Exile (598 BC). One of the central themes in this book of Habakkuk can be summarised in the lines that we heard read in the first reading of today: “The upright man (the just) will live by his faithfulness” (Hab 2:4). And in the gospel today, Jesus suggests that we can merit the Kingdom of God by the fulfilment of our ordinary, daily duties done with a little faith, even if that faith is only as big as a mustard seed. It is faith that converts ordinary things of daily life into extraordinary signs of the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, “When you have done all you have been told to do, say, “We are merely servants: we have done no more than our duty” (Lk 17:10).

### ***The Spirituality of Daily Life***

In the context of the word of God this morning I would like to invite you to reflect on the spirituality of daily life, or the spirituality of ordinary things – a spirituality that is at the heart of the religious order that I belong to: the Salesians of Don Bosco.

We are called, ‘Salesians’ in honour of the French Saint, Francis de Sales (1567-1622), who believed that all Christians are called to a life of holiness according to their state of life. And holiness consists in the fulfilment of our duties with a great devotion. Much before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council that called all Christians to a life of holiness, St Francis would write to ‘Philothea’, in his classical, *An Introduction to the Devout Life*:

“It is not merely an error but a heresy to suppose that a devout life (holiness) is necessarily banished from the soldier’s camp, the merchant’s shop, the prince’s court, or the domestic hearth” (Chap. III).

This spirituality of daily life was lived out in an exemplary manner by St John Bosco (1815-1888), who lived in Turin in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He also passed on this simple spirituality to his boys, for whom he gave his life. A story is told of St Dominic Savio (1842-1857) who was the student of St John Bosco. When he entered the home run by Don Bosco (which was called the Oratory), the little Dominic Savio wanted to become a saint. Initially he thought, one became a saint through asceticism and penance. So Dominic

used to put stones on his bed and sleep on them. When St John Bosco came to discover this, he gently told him: "Dominic, in my school becoming a saint is very simple. Sanctity consists in fulfilling your daily duties." The young Dominic Savio began to cheer up, and indeed he did become a saint.

### ***How can I live the spirituality of daily life?***

The gospel text of today begins with the request of the apostles to Jesus: "Increase our faith." And Jesus replies, "If you had faith like a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you" (Lk 17:5-6). Often people quote these lines implying that if you had enough faith you could perform a show of miracles. This could well be the case. However, in the lines that follow (Lk 17:7-10) Jesus seems to imply something else. He talks about the fulfilment of duties. So, is Jesus saying, if we had faith like a mustard seed our ordinary activities of daily life could become extraordinary? I tend to think so.

So then, here we have the first clue on how we can move towards holiness: add a little bit of faith to the fulfilment of our daily duties. When we add faith to my daily work, we begin to participate in the creative and redemptive work of God. I strongly believe that my sermon in itself may not touch anyone, but the personal sacrifice of time and effort that I had to put-in in preparing this homily, when offered to God an oblation, becomes redemptive for all of us. A parent's words may not directly save a child, but it is the sacrifice that the parent makes in faith, in working for the child, that could contribute to the wellbeing of the child in the sight of God.

Now, how do I add faith to my daily tasks? Simple: by raising my mind and heart to God. In this process I am personally inspired by two figures – one, an Italian fictional character, and the other, a French priest who lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I am not too sure if you have read the series of books or watched the movie: *Don Camillo* (movie, acted by Terence Hill). This funny parish priest has an interesting habit as he goes about his daily adventures. He spontaneously talks to Jesus on the crucifix that hangs on the wall of the sacristy. And often Jesus does answer him! In one such conversation about 'public opinion', Don Camillo tells Jesus: But public opinion has some value!!! And Jesus replies: I know that, Don Camillo, public opinion has nailed me to the cross!!!

The French priest Michel Quoist (1921-1997) is more contemporary. His book *Prayers of Life* is a collection of prayers spontaneously uttered as he goes about his daily life. I read this book when I was 18, and it made a very deep impression on my spirituality. Just to give you an example: Father Quoist goes to watch a football game on a Friday night. He begins to pray even as he watches the game. He compares the football game to the liturgy of life as "the ball moves from celebrant to celebrant." He realises that in the game of life God is the coach. And he prays that he be a player, rather than a spectator in the game of life.

I would like to conclude this reflection with the words of St Paul to the Corinthians. These words add the most important aspect to the spirituality of daily life: "And though I have the power of prophecy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all *the faith necessary to move mountains* – if I am without love, I am nothing" (1Cor 13:2). Yes, love moves mountains in our daily lives. It lightens up our duties.

When we have faith and love in the fulfilment of our daily duties, we can sing like the blind poet John Milton, particularly when we are incapacitated by age or sickness: "They also serve [God] who only stand and wait."

"The road of life was bright  
It stretched before my sight.  
The Lord was at my side  
to be my friend and guide.  
And so I started out.  
"But then the sky grew dark,  
and the road grew steep and stark.  
Rocks and ruts cut my feet.  
My legs grew sore and weak.  
I scarce could travel on.  
"I turned and cried 'My Lord!  
Why this pain; why this plight?  
Why these ruts; why these rocks?  
Why this darkness? Where's the light?  
I cannot carry on.'  
"The Lord replied, 'My child!  
Why this fear; why this fright?  
Where's your faith? Where's your trust?  
Love chose this road for you."  
(Author unknown)

Just as in that poem sometimes our cross or various difficulties make us question and wonder about our faith and God. There are times when we all doubt. When something goes wrong we may, in a moment of foolishness, say God doesn't care, or God is gone on vacation, or ask "Does God exist?" In the first reading today the prophet Habakkuk cried out to God, "How long, Lord, am I to cry for help while you will not listen?" (Hab 1:2) In the Gospel the apostles asked Jesus, "Increase our faith." (Luke 17:5) What answer did they both receive? God said to Habakkuk at the end of our first reading, "...the upright man will live by his faithfulness." (Hab 2:4) In the Gospel, did Jesus increase his apostles' faith? No. He said, "Were your faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you." (Luke 17:6) We already have all the faith we need. We already have



enough faith to say to a tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. In other words, we already have enough faith to help us overcome life's problems. Instead it is a question of drawing on the gift of faith that we already possess. We are sons and daughters of God but what a pity it is that we don't allow this faith to have more of an effect in our lives.

We struggle when we need not struggle; we are afraid when we need not be afraid; we are discouraged when we need not be discouraged. And all because we do not use the little bit of faith we have and trust in God to make things come out right. Sometimes we look at ourselves instead of God. We look at ourselves and we say "I can't do it. I am not strong enough, wise enough. I do not have the money, or the faith, or the ability to succeed in what I am doing." That may be true, we may not be able on our own. But with God we can accomplish what we could not do without God. Sometimes too when we look at the Church, or listen to journalists' comments, we see only the negative. But the Church is also mystical and God is with the Church to the end of time. The words of Paul to Timothy in our second reading are very beautiful. Paul is saying to Timothy, "Don't look at yourself, look at what God has given you, do not be timid."

"I am reminding you to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you. God's gift was not a spirit of timidity but the Spirit of power and love and self-control."

What had God given to Timothy? St. Paul ordained Timothy when he laid hands on him and Paul is reminding Timothy to remember the gift of priesthood he received from God at Ordination and fan that gift into a flame.

Habakkuk cried out to God, "How long, O Lord, am I to cry for help while you will not listen?" (Hab 1:2) The apostles asked Jesus for more faith and he said, "Were your faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:5)

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It stretched before my sight.  
The Lord was at my side  
to be my friend and guide.

And so I started out.  
“But then the sky grew dark,  
and the road grew steep and stark.  
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