

Sermon for Pentecost 17 (C): 2 October 2022

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 95; 2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14; Luke 17: 5-10

The context of today's Gospel reading is Jesus' journey to Jerusalem – his journey to his death. As we move closer to the end of this journey in Luke's Gospel, we are aware that Jesus knew the danger he was facing, and the danger his disciples were facing as well because of him. Today we find him once more trying to help his disciples realise that following him is a deeply serious undertaking – it is not for the faint-hearted. It is demanding; in previous chapters, he has outlined just how demanding it is.

No wonder then that they ask him to increase their faith, as we heard this morning. Jesus' response is that even with little faith, great things can be accomplished. Even faith the size of a mustard seed.¹

Have you seen mustard seeds? You can buy them at the supermarket. They are used as a pickling spice, and for general flavouring. And they are tiny – the size of a pin head, no more. Jesus makes the point, through his favourite literary device of hyperbole, that even a tiny amount of faith can achieve great things. That's the point about the mulberry tree – it's a reference to a large tree with a vast root system, so not easily uprooted, let alone planted in the middle of the sea! His comparison here is plain nonsense, but it makes his meaning clear. Even with what we might think is a small amount of faith, much can be achieved. I for one find that extremely consoling – I'm sure you do too.

The second part of today's Gospel underlines the demands of the Gospel even further. Don't expect to be thanked or praised simply for doing what is commanded, he tells them. His disciples are not to preen themselves because they do what is their duty, as the Pharisees do.² To make this point, Jesus talks of what is expected of slaves. Slaves have to do their job, and could not expect to be praised for it.

In some Bible translations, like the King James Bible, the word used here is not slaves, but servants, and that is obviously a much more comfortable word for modern hearers. Slavery is abhorrent to us. But the Greek word Luke uses means 'slave', not servant.

As he does so often in his parables and teaching, Jesus uses examples from everyday life to make his point clear. And slavery certainly was an everyday reality in the ancient world. While there were some paid servants, people who had some choice over their lives, there were many, many more slaves than servants. Slaves had no choice over their lives. They were owned. They were property that could be bought and sold. In the Roman Empire, something between 40 and 50 per cent of the population were slaves. Slaves did all the dirty work, but some, a few, were also in quite high positions – civil servants and teachers and the like. Some could even raise some money and buy their freedom. Some were treated well by their masters – many no doubt were not.

So can we say that Jesus approved of slavery, because he spoke of it in this way? There are many other examples of slavery in the Bible, simply because it was a reality in the Biblical world. It was taken for granted. Philosophers rarely raised questions about it – it was just the way the world was, the way it worked. People could not imagine how the world would work without slavery.

Slavery continued for many centuries, gradually dying out in Europe. When we think of slavery, we usually have in mind the terrible slave trade that saw Africans captured and transported to the Americas, cheap slave labour for the growing of sugar and cotton and

¹ Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015, 154

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 261

tobacco. Some 10 to 12 million people were transported by this evil trade operated by a number of European countries from the 16th century on.

By the early 19th century, there was growing opposition to the slave trade. In England William Wilberforce and other abolitionists fought hard for decades to get slavery abolished; they finally succeeded with the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which abolished slavery throughout most of the British Empire.

Opposition to slavery was also growing in the United States, and led eventually to the American civil war. But Christians who opposed slavery were strongly attacked by evangelical scholars in the southern slave states who were bitterly opposed to emancipation.³ They argued that “the Bible from cover to cover endorsed slavery”, because of such passages as we have heard today. The theologians pushing this line were some of the best theologians of their day, and included what have been called the “fathers of twentieth century evangelicalism and [of] the modern expression of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy”.

Now you must be wondering where this history lesson is going. What is it doing in a sermon? Let me explain.

At present our national church is convulsed by an increasingly ugly dispute over the blessing of same-sex marriages. It came to a head at the General Synod meeting earlier this year, and more recently through the launch of a so-called diocese for Anglicans opposed to same-sex marriage. The Synod of the Diocese of Sydney a couple of weeks ago declared that it was in “godly grief” because of the “deep breach of fellowship in the Anglican Church of Australia ... on matters of doctrine and human sexuality”. Its leaders have called Australian bishops who disagree with them on this issue as “revisionists”. Sydney Synod effectively urged its Archbishop to do anything and everything to push Sydney’s hard-line opposition into other dioceses. Let’s call it what it is – it is a take-over strategy writ large.

They claim that they are only being faithful to Scripture; that they are upholding “Biblical marriage”. And one of the Bible passages they use most often to bolster their claim is Jesus’ teaching about divorce in Matthew Chapter 19. There Jesus reminds his hearers that God made human beings male and female, and that “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (verse 5). Aha! Here is Jesus specifically claiming that marriage is between a man and a woman, the opponents of same-sex marriage claim. This, and this only, is “Biblical marriage”, they say. They claim from these brief comments that Jesus condemned same-sex marriage.

The Dean of Trinity College Theological School, Canon Bob Derrenbacher, a fine Scripture scholar, has demolished this claim.⁴ He has written: “If Matthew 19 has anything to say to contemporary life, it is perhaps about Jesus’ fairly strong condemnation of divorce, Jesus’ affirmation of the permanence and ideal indissolubility of marriage. It is not an apparently implicit condemnation of same-sex marriage.”

I would add that in the time of Jesus, same-sex marriage was not even remotely on the horizon. It wasn’t really on our horizon until a decade or so ago. So Jesus was speaking of marriage as it happened in his world, in his time and place, in the same way that he used slavery as a common example in his teaching.

No reputable theologian today would argue that Jesus’ use of stories involving slavery are evidence that he supported slavery. He was simply speaking in the context of his time. So too, I would strongly argue, when he spoke of marriage as between a man and a woman when he was disputing with the Pharisees about divorce, he was speaking in the context of his time.

³ This section is drawn from Kevin Giles, ‘The Biblical Argument for Slavery: Can the Bible Mislead? A Case Study in Hermeneutics’, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 66:1 (1994), 3-17.

⁴ TMA, July 2022

He was not declaring an eternal truth, that marriage can only ever be heterosexual. He was not condemning same-sex marriage.

The Bible cannot and must not be used in such a blatantly devious, political way, as a vehicle to reject out of hand those Australian bishops who in their integrity take a different view, and as an excuse to take over the Australian Church.

Let's return to Jesus' teaching today, and specifically to his example of the mustard seed. Mustard seeds might be tiny, but they pack a punch, far above their size. They add zing and flavour to many dishes. And of course, they are the primary ingredient in mustard, and as we know, just a small amount of mustard can really transform food.

We his modern disciples, like his original disciples, might fear that our faith is too small to be of any use. No, Jesus says. Even with a little faith, we can achieve much for the kingdom of God in our national church, and in our community, in lovingly upholding the rainbow community and all who are marginalised or rejected. As Jesus says elsewhere, "Do not be afraid, little flock".

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