HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 27 YEAR C

2 OCTOBER 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Today’s gospel from St Luke really sounds rather discouraging, even a bit of a slap in the face. ‘Were your faith the size of a mustard seed’ [ie pretty pathetically small] ‘you could say to this mulberry tree. “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.’ Since it seems most unlikely that either his disciples, and then by extension us, can imagine or have had experience of doing such a strange, really rather ludicrous thing, then the conclusion seems to be that our faith is indeed less, if existent at all, than the pathetically small mustard seed. And at times it may indeed seem to us that our faith is really very small, if it is there at all, and not simply an inherited and hollowed out notional assent.

There is a story, I trust apocryphal, of an earnest young man of committed evangelical belief, who on the morning of his wedding day, threw himself out of a fifth storey window to show how much faith he had; and then when he crashed to the ground and died his friends sighed sadly and concluded that he did not have enough faith. One may legitimately wonder here where the line is to be drawn between a mighty faith and a reckless putting of God to the test, which Jesus himself in his temptations, puts behind him as an instigation of the evil one.

But did Jesus really want to crush his disciples with the awareness of how hopelessly weak was their faith? Well certainly this will not be the last time that the disciples will need to be shaken out of complacency. At the last supper in St Luke’s account Jesus will say wistfully to Peter: ‘Simon, Simon! Look, Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers’. So it will be.

But nonetheless throughout the gospel and from its beginning, Jesus does encounter faith. In Luke chapter 5, to take an early example, when friends bring a paralysed man and lower him through the tiles of the roof, we are told that Jesus ‘seeing their faith’ forgives and heals him. I think the faith Jesus wants to see in us, and to see growing from mustard seed smallness is the faith that we can indeed, however much at times we doubt it, be changed and saved. This poor frail flesh and blood, this mulberry tree, can be planted in the sea, can inherit the Kingdom of God, impossible though it seems to be.

Turning now to the second half of today’s gospel, its message may also appear at first to discourage. The servant at work in the fields can hardly expect to return to the master’s house and to be invited to sit down to his meal. No, despite his hard day’s work he must now serve his master’s supper first and say to himself: I am no more than a useless servant, I have done no more than my duty. Jesus seems annoyingly and carelessly to be forgetting the importance of praise and gratitude and of timely reward. This does not seem at all to be the way, at least not in contemporary leadership and management thinking, to get the best out of people. So likely as not we feel a grumbling coming on, a justified grumbling, we may think.

But there are to be sure echoes in the gospel of this saying, particularly if it is realised that our hard work, our diligent service, can run the risk of being done for the powerful motive of building our own kingdom, our own reputation, our own prized sense of importance and not for the building up of the kingdom of God. Those who so exalt themselves, we are told again and again, will be humbled. It is rather those who see their own smallness, weakness, failure, uselessness, who can be exalted. Movingly Jesus says in St John’s Gospel, in the farewell discourses, ‘I do not call you servants any more. I call you friends’. But it is only those who know themselves to be, and who truly are servants, who can be called friends. So actually, strangely and wonderfully, what Jesus does in fact want to do is precisely to invite us in, to sit us down at table and to wait upon us. In Luke chapter 12 the servants who are waiting ready for their master’s return, who are diligent in their humble service, are told that the master ‘will do up his belt, sit them down at table and wait on them’.

In today’s second reading, St Paul says to his disciple Timothy: ‘you have been trusted to look after something precious; guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us.’ And this is not a spirit of ‘timidity’ of the false humility, really pride, which says ‘I have no strength to serve’ but it is the Spirit of ‘power and love, and self-control’ – a spirit going out to others in love and service. And in the first reading the prophet Habakkuk senses the paralysing discouragement of the people: ‘How long, Lord, am I to cry for help while you will not listen’. I think we know that cry, that fear that the Lord does not hear. The answer is in a great patience and perseverance: ‘Write the vision down … it is eager for its own fulfilment, it does not deceive; if it comes slowly, wait, for come it will without fail’.

Jesus prays for us, as he did for Simon, that our faith will not fail. He longs for the day when he will sit us down at table and wait upon us.