

PENTECOST 17C 02-10-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Lamentations 1.1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1.1-14;

Luke 17.1-10

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.' The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' The Lord replied, 'If you had 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. 'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"'

The reading from Lamentations and the Psalm, both from the Hebrew Bible, are reflecting on the Exile: the time when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians and many of the people were taken away as captives to live in a strange land. It was a disastrous, low moment in Israel's history: Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, so the centres of society, government and religion were gone. No wonder people were so upset.

Most people will be familiar with the psalm, probably from the 1978 song that uses some of its words; in fact many people have no idea it actually comes from the Bible and think Boney M wrote it!

The last few verses of Psalm 137 are often omitted, and you can see why. They are truly awful: asking God for revenge on the people of Babylon, even down to killing their babies. Maybe the invaders committed atrocities on the people of Israel; probably they did. Psalms like this reflect the thinking of the time: an 'eye for an eye' kind of justice, so if you kill one of my people I get to kill one of yours.

Jesus came to teach us a better way and talked about forgiveness, turning the other cheek, not seeking revenge but actually praying for your enemy.

Today's Gospel reading has Jesus teaching about forgiveness. He told the disciples that if someone sins against them seven times in a day, and turns back seven times and says 'I repent', you must forgive them. The apostles responded by saying, 'Increase our faith!' which is not surprising really, after that. We all know how hard it can be to forgive and keep on forgiving someone who continually messes up. And this teaching has at times been misused, for example to tell women they must keep forgiving their abusive husbands, or to convince people to put up with injustice and oppression.

We can see what Jesus was saying when he told the disciples they only needed a tiny, mustard-seed-sized faith, but why on earth would you want to tell a mulberry tree to go and be planted in the sea? Jesus liked to paint pictures, sometimes using ridiculous imagery because it helps us remember the point.

The next story, about the obedient slave doing what was expected of him or her, reminds us that this was a world that ran on slavery. Everyone knew what was expected of a slave; slaves were everywhere, and all but the poorest had slaves. So why did Jesus tell this story?

He began by saying 'Who among you would say to your slave...'. So Jesus was talking to people who owned slaves. While he was talking about how a good slave should behave- with unquestioning obedience, not expecting thanks- no doubt his listeners were nodding their heads in agreement.

Then he turned the story upside down and said, 'So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have only done what we ought to have done!'

Imagine how insulted they might have felt! But this is what Jesus did: he talked about the first being last and the last being first, reminding all of us that in God's sight we are all equal.

What are we ordered to do? What is it that God expects of us? The two great commandments are a good start. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength; and we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. Everything else flows from this. And we do this without expecting or seeking praise or reward, because it is what God expects of us.

The extract from the second letter to Timothy we heard this morning reminds us that we are to rely on the power of God who has saved us and called us, not because of anything we have done but by the grace given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

In other words, it was always God's intention to love us before we were born, before we'd had the chance to do anything- good or bad. We can't earn God's love by doing good works: we do good works because God loves us and expects us to behave this way.

To summarise: faith is something difficult to define and easy to worry about. Jesus reassures us that it is OK to start small, because a teeny, tiny bit of faith goes a long way, and God will do the rest.

Forgiveness is required of us Christians, and we must take it seriously. That's not to say it will always be easy to do, but we need to work at it and keep trying.

If someone has hurt us very deeply, it might take years to reach a place where we can feel we have truly forgiven them; but I think it is the intention that matters. As long as I know I need to forgive, and I want to forgive, then God understands how hard it can be and will help us, growing our little seed of faith.

The Anglican Synod will be happening next weekend, and some contentious issues will be debated by the clergy and lay people there. There will be opposing viewpoints and arguments; but if everyone can bear in mind that all those present are loved by God, we can be good-natured and forgiving in our disagreements.

Every community and family, however large or small, needs the ability to forgive and accept difference. As individuals we need to forgive past hurts or they will control us, making us bitter and vengeful.

So let us be glad that the Holy Spirit living in us will help us to live in the present, forgiving what is past and growing our faith into the future.

The Lord be with you.