

Faith can move mountains...she's a strong girl!

You may have noticed a theme common to our 3 readings today...

In our first reading at the beginning, the prophet Habakkuk's faith was being tested, as he cries out to God 'O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?' (I wonder how many of us can relate to that?!) At the end of the passage, God reminds him that 'the righteous live by their faith'. It's comforting to know that even a prophet can sometimes feel that God is silent and a bit far off!

In our second reading, Paul's letter to Timothy, Paul comments on Timothy's 'sincere faith', and that of his grandmother and mother, and exhorts Timothy to 'keep the faith'.

And in our gospel, we hear the apostles asking Jesus 'increase our faith!' It is interesting to note that they actually ask Jesus to increase their faith, and so acknowledge that faith comes by God's grace, and not our own efforts - though there are things we can do to nurture and mature our faith.

So what is faith?

Everyone, I believe, has some kind of faith in something. When people get into their car, they believe it will start, though most of us don't understand the intricacies of the internal combustion engine. We are fortunate enough to be able to turn on a tap, in the faith that water will come out of it, even though we can't see it until we turn the tap on. There are lots of different things that people put their faith in, without questioning it.

The comedian Milton Jones is a Christian and defines faith in this way, which I think is quite helpful;

'Faith is like standing still in the noise, knowing that the bus is coming. And occasionally, through the fog and the traffic, catching a glimpse of something big and red. Some of the others waiting might give up. Or decide they can make the journey on their own. Or that there is no journey - that the bus stop is all there is: a bench and a shelter, with a single trainer lying on the roof - it's just the way things are...'

So, faith does require patience and perseverance, a bit like waiting for a bus. While we can't actually see the bus, we believe that it is there somewhere, ever drawing nearer to us. And those moments of 'catching a glimpse of something big and red' are those special times, when we gain an unexpected, fleeting sense of God's presence; be it through a piece of music, a conversation, a beautiful view, or piece of art, poem or any number of other things. These moments can not only strengthen our faith at the time, but we can draw on them and relive the experience, in times in which we may find it harder to believe. It can help to keep a written note of these memories, as a resource to call on when needed.

It's ok - and in fact healthily normal - to have times in which our faith is a bit wobbly - I once had a spiritual director who was a Franciscan Friar, and I remember him saying that some days he's woken up in the morning wondering what it's all about! Uncertainty is allowed - after all, as it has been said, the opposite of faith is not doubt - it's *certainty*. Otherwise, it wouldn't be *faith*.

In another gospel story, a man with a son with an unclean spirit approaches Jesus, and cries out to him 'I believe - help my unbelief!' This can be our prayer too; we *want* to believe, but it is not necessarily the easy option - at all. We heard in today's gospel though, that faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, is enough.

As with the others at Milton's bus stop, faith is something we can choose to embrace or reject. If we choose to embrace it, we in some way relinquish a bit of control - which isn't always easy. We admit that we cannot survive in our own strength. We put our trust in something outside of and greater than ourselves, which can make us feel vulnerable. And this goes completely against the grain of how society encourages us to be!

But if we reject it and close our minds, we will never know what we might be missing. If we walk away from the bus stop (unless we live in the countryside) we have missed our chance of catching the bus - though we can at any time return to it.

Sunday after Sunday in church, we say the Creed. We will say it again in a few minutes. This is not a prayer, more a statement of our faith; what we aspire to believe. There may be parts that we are not sure we believe, or that we can't get our heads around; but that's ok. There will be someone somewhere who feels they do 'get' that bit, so as a community of faith, we have it covered.

Kallistos Ware, a Bishop in the Orthodox church, talks of the creed in a helpful and interesting way. He writes 'In the creed we do not say "I believe that there is a God", we say "I believe in one God".

Between belief that and belief in, there is a crucial distinction. It is possible for me to believe that someone or something exists and yet for this belief to have no practical effect upon my life'.

He draws an analogy with a phone book (slightly dated now!) that we can look through it, and are willing to accept that the people exist, although we know none of them personally. But when we say to a friend 'I believe in you', we're doing so much more than just acknowledging their existence. 'I believe in you' means 'I turn to you... I rely on you... I put my full trust in you ...and I hope in you'. This is what we're saying to God in the creed.

Faith is not a logical certainty; but a personal relationship.

So, at a time when it's particularly difficult, on national and international levels, to know who or what we can trust and believe in, we can be assured that God can be trusted - and does not change...

May our prayer be daily, 'Lord, increase our faith'.

Amen