

## **TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

*Gospel: Luke 17:5-10*

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 plowing 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!'"

### **REFLECTION 1:**

### **GO PUBLIC WITH FAITH**

Those of us who lived through the 60s and 70s of the last century will recall the vast housing boom throughout the suburbs of Dublin, north and south of the Liffey. At the time, the then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid was concerned about setting up parishes in newly established areas and above all to provide enough churches to accommodate the new residents and supply them with masses and the sacraments. It was felt at the time that these churches should be large with ample seating and décor to accommodate the influx. Churches such as those in Larkhill, Artane, Sallynoggan, Donnycarney and many others dotted the landscape. On most Sundays today these same church buildings are only partially filled with worshippers as so many now in the 20 to 40 age group are conspicuous by their absence. So, what has happened to the dreams of full congregations at Sunday worship?

I believe that our Gospel for today (Luke 17: 5-10) can guide us towards a resolution to our concern: we are now, as never before, to go public with our faith, the only qualification required is our strong love for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It even appeared too much for the disciples in Jesus' day, so they cried out 'Lord, increase our faith!' So, Jesus responded with an image of faith – the mustard seed - which the Sower God plants in our hearts. Buried deep, it germinates in darkness, but if we fail to tend the seed it will never break through the protective membrane and push into our lives. On the other hand when the disciples do live by faith, even 'mustard seed faith', they can continue to do extraordinary things like persisting in forgiveness about which Jesus had spoken before today's Gospel passage.

To impress us with this truth, Jesus used another image, an uprooted mulberry tree. These trees can grow up to 70 feet high and their root system is very invasive. Using exaggeration to make his point, Jesus says that the word of a disciple empowered with mustard seed faith, would be able to lift a mulberry tree and transplant it into the sea! Such is the strength that God grants to the person of faith, even in impossible situations. The ministry of Christian leaders is to care for their flocks, plough the fields of their communities and make them ready for the sowing of God's word and to feed their people at the Lord's table. After Vatican II concluded in 1965, we in Ireland as it were, became relaxed in our faith, all the time waiting for the definitive guidelines harvested from Vatican II. Sadly, these directives were somewhat delayed, the New Code of Canon Law and the much-anticipated Catechism of the Catholic Church did not appear until the 1980s – leaving a whole generation without these sure guidelines.

For years parents consoled themselves with the idea that children who were estranged from the church would return when the time came for their own children to participate in the sacraments. There are many today who feel deprived because they never experienced any connection to the church to begin with. The seeds of faith did not grow. So we need those who have that mustard seed of faith to herald, to preach, to teach, guide, encourage and nourish, challenging the generations yet to come. We need only be committed to Christ and resolute in our determination that the Gospel be more known to the next generation.

## REFLECTION 2:

## 'THE FLAME OF FAITH'

Those of us who lived through the Second World War will recall that there was a great shortage of good coal. It was scarce and expensive. Turf was in plentiful supply, but invariably wet. With so few houses centrally heated, in cold winters, a warm fire could make a house a home. The struggle was to keep the fire lighting. This war-time experience reminds me of the words of St Paul to Timothy in our second reading today (2 Tim 1) 'Stir into flame the gift of God'. Now what Paul was referring to there was the faith that was kindled within him through his encounter with Christ on his journey to Damascus. That same flame of faith had been passed on to his fellow disciple Timothy.

When the disciples, en route to Jerusalem with Jesus (Lc.17:5-10), learned more of the challenges of discipleship, they feared that they did not have the faith to meet those challenges. To that end they begged, 'Increase our faith'. Faith is not quantifiable in terms of pounds or kilos. Nevertheless, it is the power that inspires us, helps us to persevere, enables us to struggle and not lose heart. It also keeps us mindful of God's abiding presence.

Jesus' images of the mustard seed and the mulberry tree graphically illustrate the power of faith to move the unmovable and accomplish what appears to be impossible. Jesus' parable about the servant seems to say that faith is not a reward for those who have reached the highest standards - rather it's for everybody. When we believe, when we have faith, we are merely doing our job as disciples and should look for no reward. We are to keep on keeping the faith.

Faith is God's gift to be looked after, stirred and fed like a flame and we do this with the help of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us all. So, how do we fan into a flame God's gift of faith that has been kindled within us. One of the Lucan post-resurrection narratives comes to mind. When Jesus met two of his disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus, he stayed with them. He cited and interpreted every passage of scripture that referred to him. He took bread, pronounced the blessing, broke the bread and began to share it with them. Their eyes were opened, and the flame of faith within them was set afire. They testified 'Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us? (Lc. 24).

These very same resources, the bread of the sacred word and the living bread of the Eucharist, remain available to each of us. These are the means whereby our faith is stirred and fanned into a flame. For that reason, we return each Sunday to Jesus' table, where we are fed, where faith burns, so that others may see and believe.