

**LUKE 17:5-10**  
**ST JOHN'S, 6.10.19, 9.30 am**

**INTRODUCTION**

*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you (v 6). Hand up anyone who's ever tried this! Now put your hand down if nothing happened.*

If any hands were left up, I'd have to ask "Why did you want to move a tree into the sea? Do you really think that Jesus meant us to go around commanding trees to move to somewhere completely inappropriate?"

The problem I have, though, is that I'm left feeling that my faith must be pretty puny, if its not even big enough to move a tree like this – its not even as big as a tiny mustard seed!

At the beginning of this passage, the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. They don't want to be able to get trees to uproot themselves on their say-so. They want to be able to obey the command that Jesus has just given them: *If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, "I repent", you must forgive him (17:3-4)*. The apostles realise that they desperately need God's help if they're going to obey Jesus' command. So why does Jesus start talking about mustard seeds and mulberry trees?

**FAITH THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED**

When I read up about this passage, I found that the original Greek implies something which we can't easily translate into English. What Jesus actually said to his disciples was, *If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, which you do have . . .* " In other words, you only need a smidgeon of faith in order to accomplish the impossible – even to the extent of forgiving the same person seven times in one day.

There are a number of things I think we can learn from this. The first is that we don't need more faith. Our faith only has to be as big as a mustard seed, which is so small that its almost invisible. If we have any faith at all, then its already as big as a mustard seed. But maybe what we do need is to start exercising the faith we already have. During the first six weeks of my sabbatical in 2017, while I was training to cycle from Lands End to John O'Groats, I was cycling an average of 74 miles a week. By the time we started our big ride, my muscles were just about strong enough to cope with pedalling about 1,035 miles in three weeks which we recorded from End to End. But since the day we arrived at John O'Groats, I've only managed an average of eight miles a week. All those muscles I built up have long turned to flab again, because I'm not giving them the same amount of exercise. In the same way, if we exercise the faith we already have, we find that it grows so that its able to meet the challenges we face. If we don't exercise our faith, if we just give up when things get tough, if we take the attitude, 'I can't do that; it needs someone with greater faith than me', then we'll never exercise our faith, and it will never grow stronger. We don't need

more faith; even if its only the size of a mustard seed, its big enough; what we do need is to exercise the faith we have.

The second thing we can learn from this is that we don't need great faith, we need a great God. It doesn't matter how big or small our faith is; the important thing is the Person in whom we place our faith. For example, do we have faith that God will provide for us, or do we put our faith in pension schemes, saving schemes, and insurances? Don't get me wrong – we need to be wise about how we use the money God has given us, and part of that wisdom includes making provision for the time when we can no longer earn our living. But while we should plan for our future, we should remember that even the best plans aren't fool-proof. If we trust God to provide for us, we'll find that he's far and away more reliable than the safest pension scheme or bank account. We don't need a great faith – by itself, faith can achieve nothing, especially when its invested in the wrong place – we do need to make sure that we put our faith in the Lord God Almighty, *who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us* (Ephesians 3:20).

### **PRIDE THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED**

There's one potential problem with discovering what happens when we exercise the faith we already have in the Lord: that is that as our faith grows, so does our pride. As we discover just what we can accomplish when we exercise our faith, we might begin to think that we must be quite special, and we might be tempted to forget that its not our faith which is great, its our God who is great.

And so Jesus goes on to remind his apostles that their attitude to God must always be that of a slave. A slave can only do his or her duty. A slave can't have any claim on his or her master. No matter what we accomplish through exercising our faith in the Lord, we'll never do anything more than our duty to God. Our pride must never grow bigger than the size of a mustard seed.

It's very easy to slip into the way of thinking that assumes that God owes us something for all we do for him, or for the church, or simply because we're 'good' people. "I give all my spare time to the Church, as well as all my spare cash. I live a good life. So why didn't God prevent this tragedy happening to me?" Brothers and sisters, no matter how we live our lives, no matter what we give to God or the Church, no matter what sacrifices we make for Jesus' sake, He owes us nothing. As Jesus says here, *When you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have done only what was our duty"* (v 10). Jesus himself is the supreme example of this kind of attitude, as Paul points out in his letter to the Philippians: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* (Philippians 2:5-8)

This is not to say that our Master's attitude towards us is the same as the average slave-master's attitude to his slaves. We only have to think

of Jesus washing his disciples' feet the night before he died, to remember that our master is not like the master in this story, who barely notices his slave unless the slave fails in his duty. Our master lavishes good things on us, and delights in serving us. Its our attitude which Jesus is warning us about here; no matter how faithful we are to our Lord, no matter how well we exercise our faith, no matter how many amazing answers to prayer we see, we must never allow our pride to grow, and we must never allow ourselves to think that the Lord owes us anything. He doesn't; he can't, because everything we have comes from him in the first place.

## **CONCLUSION**

Faith the size of a mustard seed can uproot mulberry trees – or move mountains, as Jesus puts it elsewhere. If we have any faith at all, we have enough. The two questions are, do we exercise our faith, and in what do we place it?

A mustard seed is tiny, but when its planted and allowed to grow, it *becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade* (Mark 4:32). We need to make sure that our faith is in the Lord God Almighty, and then we need to exercise our faith. Faith is like a muscle: it will only grow stronger when its exercised regularly.

We find it very hard to exercise our faith, but very easy to exercise our pride! The trouble is that pride is like a muscle too: if its regularly exercised, it will grow stronger. Jesus shows us how to prevent our pride growing. We need to make sure that our attitude towards the

Lord is that of a slave, who can never do any more than his or her duty. We're not give our pride a chance to grow any bigger than a mustard seed.

And let's not go round trying to uproot trees – there are far more important things to accomplish by exercising our faith!