**TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**2nd October 2022**

**Reading 1: Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4**

Little is known of the minor prophet, Habakkuk, who lived during the late 7th century B.C. just before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. He advocates patience, while waiting for Yahweh to deliver his people from adversity. The problem he faced was the indiscriminate use of military power by those who had control which is still a problem with which we are only too familiar.

The last word in our reading (faithfulness) translates the Hebrew ‘EMUNAH’ which we understand as steadfast stability in the face of disaster. This word later becomes very important both for the Qumran (Dead Sea) community and for the New Testament. (Where I transliterate a Hebrew word, I do so in capitals because Hebrew had no lower case)

The community at Qumran, called Essenes, was ultra-conservative and their manuscripts reveal much about the Jewish world of the 1st century. In their commentary on this passage, we read: "This saying refers to all in Jewry who carry out the law. On account of their labour and their faith in him who expounded the law aright [The Teacher of Righteousness] God will deliver them from the house of judgment."

Paul quotes this saying in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, but uses the word ‘faith’ (pistis) with the Greek sense of personal trust. Habakkuk 2:4 thus becomes a key text for Paul's doctrine of justification by faith—which, however is a change in emphasis from the original meaning in Habakkuk.

It is instructive to note that Hebrews 10:38 still uses the word in the old Hebrew sense of holding on while facing adversity. But the readers of Hebrews would have been familiar with the Hebrew text, while Paul used the Greek version which would be known to his readership.

**Reading II: 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14**

The Pastoral Epistles are among the later documents of the New Testament period and naturally reveal evidence of a more highly developed Church organisation. For two examples, notice that the grace that God gives to presbyters has become a sacramental laying-on-of-hands (first sentence). This ceremony was a continuation of the ancient Jewish practice, first recorded of Moses. (Numbers 27;18, 23, Deuteronomy 34;9)

Also the teaching has become ‘sound teaching’ rather than some guidelines that could be freely interpreted. (second paragraph)

These changes can be seen as natural and unavoidable in the changing situation, following the deaths of the apostles. To-day’s successors to the apostles, called ‘bishops’ have not always remembered all the blessings of their office. Newman, in 1833, rather startled the complacent bishops of the Church of England by saying, of them "We could not wish them a more blessed termination of their course than the spoiling of their goods and martyrdom"

In the same vein, Timothy is here called upon to accept his share of suffering for the Gospel and to bear these sufferings cheerfully as 'Paul' did (1:6-8). For, God has called us not because of our deeds but freely, in virtue of his grace, now manifested through the appearance of our Saviour Jesus Christ who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light (1:9-10).

'Paul' suffers for the Gospel and is not ashamed of his sufferings (so neither should Timothy). He had been appointed preacher and apostle and teacher and he is confident that he will stand firm in his charge to the end; Timothy, too, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be faithful to the Gospel (last sentence vv. 10-14).

**Gospel Luke 17:5-10**

The disciples’ request "Increase our faith" comes immediately after a warning to beware of temptations to doubt. It may be that they lacked confidence in their cause and wanted reassurance.

Jesus’ mentions the mustard seed because it was proverbially small. The tree is a fruit tree, called a sycamine, and related to the mulberry and fig trees. (Old translations mistakenly translated it ‘sycamore’ which is not even a fruit tree.) The reason Jesus mentions it particularly is because it had proverbially deep roots and was the most difficult to dig up.

What he is saying, therefore, is that the slightest spark of faith is sufficient to achieve the apparently impossible. In one form or another this idea frequently crops up in Jesus’ sayings. (see Mark 10;25, 11;23, Matthew 17;20)

But there is an interesting distinction between the Synoptics. In Matthew and Mark reference is made to the removal of 'this mountain' This reflects Isaiah’s levelling of the mountains for the returning exiles from Babylon with the Lord at their head. (Isaiah 40;3-5) But Luke was writing for Greek Christians who would have little knowledge or interest in Jewish history. So, he reflects the more Hellenistic idea that nature cannot change: trees do not belong in the sea.

But, on this occasion, Jesus moderates the idea of degrees of faith with a follow-up parable. If one had more faith than his neighbour, would that make him a better Christian?

It is feasible that Pharisees of the day calculated how much they pleased God by how well they kept his Law. Anything they did more than the minimum expected could be credited to one’s account, or to that of a family member. This principle was certainly used by the Catholic Church in the West from the Medieval period unto the Reformation. If one did more good than could be reasonably expected, it could gain credit in the sight of God under the heading Works of Supererogation.

However, the behaviour of the Master and Servant/Slave (the same word, ‘doulos’ is used for both) in the story warns the disciples against supposing that faith, and the obedient service of the Lord in which faith is expressed, establishes any claim for reward. "When you have done all that is commanded you, say 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

The picture Jesus has painted is starkly clear. A slave has no claim on his master - neither wages nor thanks - quite independently of how much he may have done for his master. His service is utterly taken for granted. The application of the parable: '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!" (v. 10)

If understood and accepted, this could cause a major rethink of the relationship between mankind and God. How many people do you know who assume that religion and God are there for their benefit? If religion does not work – discard it as useless. If God does not give you what you ask, what use is he?

Jesus sets a person face to face with God, that is, without the Law intervening. He establishes a person as a ‘doulos’ over against God, standing in obedience to his personal and acknowledged sovereignty. There is no doubt that the parable belongs to Jesus' criticism of his contemporaries’ idea of the nature of God. He pronounces a new and negative verdict on the idea of reward and he acknowledges something quite different: the reality of divine recompense, of God's sheer goodness.

But the lesson remains a general one. All disciples are God's slaves. They have no claim to reward for doing what God expects of them; they must humbly acknowledge that they are only poor servants and privileged ones at that.