

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Do you ever doubt your faith? Or question whether or not that God exists? Most people do doubt, and for some, they lose their faith altogether. I know I did for several years in my late teenage years – it wasn’t cool at 17 to be a practising Christian at art school, where everyone seemed to be an atheist. Even Mother Teresa experienced profound and lengthy periods of doubt in her faith, feeling an absence of God for almost 50 years and questioning God’s existence. We tend to think of her as the model of a faithful Christian, because she lived her life in a truly selfless and Christ-like way. But from her private letters, released after her death, she had many struggles with her faith, and had long periods feeling spiritual emptiness and a profound sense of disconnection from God. Despite her inner darkness, she continued her work with the poor, viewing her struggle as a way to connect with the suffering of the abandoned, and expressing a deep commitment to God’s call, despite her doubts.

So, how can faith be increased? And is it really up to us?

In today’s gospel reading, it is Jesus’ disciples who are asking for more faith. Even they sometimes struggled with believing and trusting in God and in their leader, Jesus. The disciples are the ones who had left everything to follow Jesus. But they had been listening to his recent teachings, which were challenging, to say the least. We need to look at the previous verses, 1 to 4, prior to our reading, to understand why the disciples are now asking how they can increase their faith.

First, Jesus deals with the problem of temptation – “occasions of stumbling” (in verses 1-2). This could include any number of examples of bad behaviour which are stumbling blocks to faith. The penalty for such misconduct, Jesus says, is worse than sudden death. Second, (in verses 3-4) Jesus balances judgment with grace by addressing the way that we should deal with people who hurt us. We are to rebuke the offender and, if there is repentance, we must forgive. We are in frequent need of being forgiven, so we need to forgive frequently.

The disciples are so worried and concerned by these requirements, that they ask Jesus for the faith needed to meet them. Jesus does not respond by dispensing faith on the spot, but instead tells them about the power of faith, even a very little faith. He uses the example of a mustard seed, the smallest seed that was known then, to describe the amount of faith the disciples needed. Jesus chooses this tiny seed to set up a contrast with the large mulberry tree - engaging in hyperbole to demonstrate the great power of even the smallest bit of faith. The person of faith taps into God’s power, which makes all things possible; even moving trees, which is difficult, and causing them to grow in saltwater, which is impossible.

Faith, to put it yet another way, is not about believing in something or someone without ever having any doubts. The theologian Paul Tillich puts it this way, “*Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith.*” He means that doubt is a part of faith.

The writer Anne Lamott makes this clearer when she writes,

*“The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”*

The disciples ask for more faith. That means they have some faith. If they have some faith, if we have some faith, then we have enough faith. Faith the size of a mustard seed is plenty, Jesus says. Because it's not a question of how much faith we have, it's a question of who we put our faith in.

This is all that Jesus asks of us: To notice the emptiness, the mess, and wait for the light, and to trust him. Even when things seem very dark. To hold onto our mustard seed sized faith, and trust that it is enough. Not because of the amount of our faith, but because of who we are placing it in. Our God.

The disciples may say, “Increase our faith!” They can ask for faith; they can prepare themselves to receive it; but it is ultimately God's to give. It is not our faith that works wonders such as moving trees, but the God who stands behind our faith that does so.

How, then, do we get this powerful faith? How can we watch and wait for this faith to come?

The disciples had it right; faith is the gift of God, so we can pray that God will increase our faith. Time spent in prayer is fundamental to the development of our faith, but there are also other things that we can do to cooperate with God, who wants to increase our faith.

Association with people of faith builds faith, so our participation in the worship and life of the church is important. Reading the Bible will inform and correct our faith. Without the guidance of the scriptures, we tend to have faith in something smaller than God - money, a charismatic person, the government - something that will ultimately disappoint us. The scriptures keep drawing us to God so that we can develop the kind of powerful faith of which Jesus speaks here.

We grow in faith as we act in faith. Every gift God gives us is increased and strengthened by practicing it, and this is true of faith. Mother Teresa continued her good works with the dying, even when she felt her faith had gone. She continued to hope for a return of her faith by doing God's work. Faith means believing even when the outcome seems in doubt.

Let us pray now for the increase of our faith. Loving and faithful God, increase our faith, even though our love for you is small compared to your love for us. We especially pray that you will sustain the faith and hope of those who are sick, lonely, oppressed and anxious: in faith we pray.

AMEN