

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)  
2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022

'Increase our faith!' cry the apostles. We can identify with that cry, we could probably all make it our own and say from the bottom of our hearts that this is what we want. It is worth noticing the context of this, because it comes at the tail end of another story – Jesus has just told the apostles that if someone harms them they must rebuke him and then, if he accepts the rebuke and changes they must forgive him – and as long as he goes on hurting them, the pater of rebuke, repentance and forgiveness must go on and in response to this challenge to keep forgiving their wide-eyed response is: 'Increase our faith'.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ asks difficult things of us. It asks us to do the sort of things a citizen of The Kingdom of Heaven would do, and those sort of things are SO different from what a child of this world would do that it can be very challenging indeed. Our lives as disciples are always lived caught up in this tension: the way a citizen of The Kingdom of Heaven would behave as against the way a citizen of this world would behave. Occasionally the two are the same, but often they diverge and sometimes they diverge radically and that is when we cry out 'Increase our faith'!

So what can we do if we want a deeper faith? How might that heartfelt cry for a deeper faith be answered? This is made a bit more complicated by the fact that we often make this anguished cry when we are confronted by something really difficult – some major challenge, or the threat of change, or a huge gap between how we might act as a citizen of the Kingdom on the one hand and how we might act as a child of this world on the other. In such a moment of crisis we are not always thinking straight, or at least not thinking calmly, and so we need a quick fix, a sudden 'faith multiplier' that will boost us over the line.

Perhaps the best place to start is with how we think of faith. Perhaps in some way we think of faith as like a 'thing', something that you can have more, or less, or none of. I might have three bananas in the fruit bowl, or I might have ten, or I might have none. If I need more bananas, then it's a question of going out and buying some more. Increase my bananas is an easy problem to solve. But faith is not a thing, a commodity that can be increased just by going and getting some more. Faith is not a thing at all, a commodity that you can count and quantify; faith is a relationship, it is a way of living that places us in every moment in the loving and saving presence of God. So 'increase our faith' is not giving me more of some 'thing' that I don't have enough of; it is deepening a relationship that is not strong enough. Faith is about my relationship with Jesus Christ that gets stronger (or 'increases') as I live every moment more and more consciously in the presence of the one who loves me and desires only my good. When a child comes to you anxious, or worried, or uncertain and you sit them down beside you and put your arm around them and say 'tell me all about it' – that is the sort of relationship of trust and intimacy that looks a bit like faith.

Imagine what it might be like to live each day with that loving, accepting and intimate presence, the one who places their arms around us and says 'tell me all about it?' This is what we have, as

followers of Christ, but so often we forget it. So often we act as if he were not there and, battered by the temptations of living as a child of this world we shout out 'increase our faith' but he is already there. He is already there.

The prophet Habakkuk says 'See how he flags, he whose soul is not at rights'. How they flag, the ones who are trying to be self-sufficient, to deal with all life's challenges alone. How they flag, those who have forgotten that God is close to them, or who act as if he did not exist. How we flag when our lives get all out of sorts and we try to manage on our own resources, or on spiritual resources we have 'banked' in the past, hoping that times of prayer from long ago will somehow bring us through the issues of today, hoping for a sudden drop of extra faith. But, Habbakuk goes on, the upright will thrive by their faithfulness. They will find the fulness of human life by being faithful to the relationship that underpins all their actions, all their choices, by living always in the shadow of the loving presence of the Lord.

'Increase our faith'. Surely there never was a follower of Christ who hasn't made this prayer. But the response we get is not a sudden delivery of a 'thing', more faith, more bananas. The response is 'Hush, don't panic, I am still here, still as close as I have always been. I am still, as I always have been, the answer to all the problems life throws at you – not a quick fix to make them go away, but the gentle presence that helps you face them as a citizen of Heaven, not a child of this world. Now, tell me all about it'.

Do you want an increase of faith? I know I do. It isn't about any heroics, it isn't just for the holy. It is there for us, there for the humble of heart. This is the something precious to be guarded with all our strength that St Paul writes about today. It is stopping for a moment and accepting that I can't do it all on my own, it is all just way beyond me. Left to my own devices, surrounded by so many powerful influences, I will, to some extent, always end up living as a child of this world, not as a citizen of Heaven. And so I place myself in the arms of the Saviour; I look back on all the ways in which he has gifted me his support and love, all the blessings he has poured out on me, and so I know that all will be well. And then, when he says, 'Now tell me about it' I will know that this is as strong as faith could be.