Sermon for 27th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Lamentations1:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10.

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At about the age of 13 I asked for a *Bullworker* –which for those who do not know is a fiendish metal tube which can be compressed with great effort by pushing on both ends in a manic bear hug. It is designed to give the user huge bronzed muscles. I never got as far as having to wonder why my muscles would be bronzed like the picture on the box. I used it every day of the Christmas holidays with no measurable difference to the size of my biceps. As for bronzed - the proverbial skin on the rice pudding would have been considerably more bronzed than me and only marginally less well-muscled.

I expected easy results quickly and became frustrated when I didn’t get them. I suspect I’m not the only one to give up on my *Bullworker*, but when we adopt the same attitude to more important things in life – expecting quick results with minimal effort can be a fatal flaw in achieving anything worthwhile. I have overcome this tendency to a degree, but I think it still lies behind my antipathy to all things gardening.

The Apostles wanted quick results with minimal effort when they asked Jesus to give them more faith (Luke 17:5).

Jesus told them they already had more than enough faith to do remarkable things – uplifting a mulberry or sycamore tree with its notoriously deep roots may be a memorable and apt illustration of faith – but it’s hardly what faith is for. It would be about as successful as my misguided efforts with the *Bullworker* to think that attempts at *telekinesis* would increase faith – but I bet I’m not the only boy who has tried that too!

Faith is a bit like a muscle – it needs exercise to grow. But even the puniest muscles can make a leg to stand and run and jump – we don’t need to wait until we ripple like an athlete before we can run for the bus.

Too often Christians wait around asking for God to come and do something special to rescue them, to guide them through difficult times, to bring longed-for success and growth, assuming they are unable to do anything themselves because they lack the faith, the power, and the courage.

Jesus doesn’t promise his disciples such easy pickings. He seems to be saying – “I’ve given you enough faith to get you started. Now give it a go.”

God invites us to work with him to develop our faith, deepen our understanding and strengthen our courage. This is what Wesley means by the life of holiness. Christian spirituality demands a cooperative spirit to work with the Holy Spirit to grow in faith, love and good works.

Sometimes, people have confused this with the idea that people can be saved by good works alone, rather than by faith. Wesley is not saying any such thing. We are saved by grace through faith – but true faith is a living thing which requires nurture for it to grow and increase the blessings for both the believer and for the world.

Faith grows when exercised in prayer, worship, Bible study, acts of charity and service.

Paul is urging his young protégé, Timothy, to dig deep and put in the effort, to “fan into flame the gift of God”, to be willing to “suffer” for the faith in the same way as modern coaches intone the mantra, “there is no gain without pain”.

Such effort on Paul’s part does not detract from the fundamental truth that the “spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” has been a gift from God and “not because of anything we have done, but because of his own purpose and grace” (2 Timothy 1:7 &9).

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Now and then, however, faith is not just difficult – it seems barely possible at all.

The *Book of Lamentations* comes from such a period when faith is crushed and clinging on for dear life. Traditionally it is thought Jeremiah wrote these poems of grief upon the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC.

In last week’s reading, we noted that Jeremiah had prophesied such a fate for Jerusalem for about 40 years; we also remembered that on the eve of the fall of the city, he went and bought a field to demonstrate his faith that one day God would restore Jerusalem. So it is rather touching to believe that Jeremiah might also have been the author of the *Lamentations.*

Jeremiah was a man of great faith and his life’s ministry had concluded in the successful prophecy of the coming judgement on Judah. He even had the promise of eventual restoration and a future new covenant – yet Jeremiah could still feel the grief and mourn the loss. Jeremiah does not crow in triumph that he has been proven right – he shares the distress of his compatriots.

This story reminds me of Elijah’s sudden fall from the triumph of Mt Carmel to the despair of Horeb. Even the most faithful servant of God can be plunged into times of despair.

John Wesley experienced the same phenomenon. He called it, “the wilderness state.” Sometimes staleness overcomes us. It may be the effect of tiredness or illness, but sometimes its causes are unclear. Wesley suggests sins committed or sins of omission may be the root cause:

The former may be compared to pouring water on a fire; the latter to withdrawing the fuel from it (Sermon 46: *The Wilderness State* II.3).

Wesley also suggests spiritual sloth may be the cause.

Whatever the diagnosis, however, the wilderness state tells us we are moving in the wrong direction. It is our subconscious telling us that something isn’t right and needs attention. The desert state is often the place for struggle with doubts and where we find our path once more. It is a place where fears and pain are confronted and trust in God renewed.

We need not fear the desert because God has travelled the desert before us. He will not abandon us. Wesley firmly opposes what he sees in the Christian Mystic tradition of commending the wilderness state as a state to be sought for its beneficial effects. This, to Wesley would be tantamount to arguing that “we are saved not by faith, but by unbelief; not by hope, but by despair” (Sermon 46: *The Wilderness State* III.12).

Wesley concludes that the wilderness state should not be deliberately sought as a spiritual exercise, but he accepts that it is a common experience when trying to grow in faith:

“…the whole work of sanctification is not, as they imagined, wrought at once;…when they first believe they are but as new-born babes, who are gradually to grow up, and may expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ” ( Sermon 46: *The Wilderness State* III.14).

Despite his own warnings, even Wesley was not immune to times of staleness and spiritual wilderness, but God will be our guide across the desert, if we turn to God in prayer, in the sacraments and in the fellowship of believers whom God has granted us to help us find our passage through.

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Perhaps you are one of those who do take faith seriously; perhaps you are one of those all too few Christians who do devote time to prayer and the study of God’s Word and are diligent in attending worship and receiving the sacrament.

It’s a bit of a kick in the stomach then to read that we should expect no special favours for our troubles.

Now we all know that God isn’t an insurance policy. We are fully aware that bad things can happen to good, faithful people. But knowing that’s how it is doesn’t make it any easier to live with.

Our natural human perspective expects quick and easy results. When it comes to faith, most of us buy a *Bullworker*. We are quite happy to believe we may be storing up treasures in heaven, but because of our short, mortal perspectives, we would also like to see a few favours handed down in the here and now. We expect our spiritual muscles to sprout overnight with minimal effort.

Jesus told his disciples who asked for a free extra measure of faith the parable of the slave who ploughed the field all day and then went home to cook his master’s dinner (Luke 17:7-10).

After all, he had only done what he had been told to do (v10).

Wesley saw the arrogance of supposing faith was a personal achievement rather than a work of grace within us. He said such ingratitude and pride could lead to a state of wilderness and loss of faith. He says:

How natural to glory in something he has received, as if he had not received it (Sermon 46: *The Wilderness State* II.6).

Wesley comments on this parable in Luke 17:7-10:

Happy is he who judges himself an unprofitable servant: miserable is he whom God pronounces such. But though we are unprofitable to Him, our serving Him is not unprofitable to us: for He is pleased to give by His grace a value to our good works, which, in consequence of His promise, entitles us to an eternal reward (Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*).

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