

Some essential lessons about faith

I wonder if you still write letters to people, using a pen and paper? Perhaps at Christmas time?

If you were going to write to your son or granddaughter or a dear friend about what matters deeply to you, what would you write? What wisdom and lessons in life would you want to share with the next generation?

Paul is writing such a letter to Timothy, whom he loves like a son. For Paul, faith in Jesus is central to his life, so this is what he focuses on. The letter is full of personal encouragement to Timothy but also a reminder of what is core in our life of faith.

In Paul's day, as is also still true in many cultures in the world today, the wisdom of an elder person was valued. Paul had a lifetime of experience to share in his mentoring relationship with Timothy. It's similar with Jesus, although his role is more that of a teacher and charismatic leader. Today's reading from Luke's Gospel contains more of the collected teachings of Jesus, still under the rubric of discipleship – how to follow Jesus in our everyday life of faith.

What do these teachers or mentors share about faith?

First is how we **acquire** faith.

Is it **inherited**, part of the DNA handed down to us from our parents? Based on observation, probably not ...

Is faith **taught**, then, like so many other lessons in life? For decades this was the approach taken. Sunday School, a form of Christian education, was seen to complement what was taught in school during the week. The hope was that if we taught Bible stories and ethics – how to behave – that would be enough. I'm sorry to report, faithful Sunday School teachers, that while this approach worked for some people, the overwhelming evidence is that it was a poor method for making lifelong disciples. We have only to look around most church congregations today to realise that the Sunday School generation of the 1950s 60s and 70s is largely absent today.

Paul's letter to Timothy suggests that faith is **caught** more than **taught**. He reminds Timothy that this living faith first lived in his grandmother Lois and then in his mother Eunice and now in Timothy himself. This inter-generational type of faith comes from observing closely how those near and dear to us live and pray and interact with others and make priorities in their life ... and by sharing about how following Jesus makes a difference. These lessons are some of the most precious gifts that we can pass on to future generations.

People who analyse how people come to and grow in faith note that there are various parts to this – which they sometimes summarise with words like **believe**, **belong**, **behave** and **become**. All of these aspects are important ... but I wonder what order that most naturally come in? Sunday School faith emphasised **believe** and **behave**, but perhaps **belong** needs to come first ...?

The second lesson about faith is that it doesn't need to be huge to have a significant effect on ourselves and others. Jesus reminds the disciples that faith the size of a mustard seed is all that is needed.

A seed contains all the DNA that's needed to grow into a mature plant. It just needs the right conditions to sprout and grow. Likewise for our faith. If it's to grow, it needs the right conditions and encouragement. It needs to be put into practice, each and every day. Just like in the childrens' song – faith is like a **muscle** – we need to use it.

Sometimes our faith can feel small and insignificant, fragile and easy to lose, like a mustard seed. That's when we need to remember that we don't need great faith, but rather **faith in a great God!** The tree that Jesus referred to in his teaching was probably a sycamore tree, the type of tree that Zacchaeus climbed to get a better view of Jesus. It has deep strong roots, so for such a tree to be uprooted even by a tiny amount of faith points to the extraordinary and transformative power of God to work in and through our lives. So the warning – or encouragement here – is not to limit God. In the words of missionary William Carey ... attempt great things for God ... expect great things from God!

It takes **courage** to have faith like this, which is why Paul challenges Timothy to not give up but rather continue to witness to God's presence and goodness in the world. Paul reminds Timothy that God's indwelling Holy Spirit gives us **power, love and self-control** – as well as all the other fruits that Paul writes about elsewhere like joy, peace, patience and so forth. The power Paul speaks of is not power to **dominate** over others but power to **persevere in faith** even when life is tough; it's power to go on hoping when the future seems unclear or lonely; it's power to continue living out God's ways of hospitality and welcome when different voices tell us to distrust 16 year old climate activists or asylum seekers or the homeless.

So the third lesson from Paul is what **energises** our faith. Clearly for Paul, the **indwelling presence of God's Spirit** tops the list. For Paul, the Spirit is also closely tied to **prayer** – conversation with God. Paul's letters indicate that he prayed often and passionately for the church communities he was associated with. He prayed bold prayers – and when words fail – he tells the Christians in Rome that the Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words. This is something of a mystery but as Paul writes to the church in Philippi ... continue to work out your faith with fear and trembling ... for it is **God** who is at work in you ... enabling you to seek God's good pleasure. So we're back once more to our sometimes small faith ... in a great God!

The other energising aspect for Paul was the riches and truth of the **Gospel** – the treasure that has been entrusted to us. We may think that of course we understand the Gospel ... but Paul's encouragement is to keep reminding ourselves of God's love and call and grace and the hope of forever life with God. **Grace** is one of the most distinctive elements of the Gospel – that we cannot earn or demand God's favour – but this favour – or blessing – is given to us as a **gift**. This notion of grace sets Christian faith apart from all the other major world faiths. So Paul urges Timothy to keep this grace in mind.

So how do we put our faith into action?

At first glance, the Gospel reading is a bit like a bucket of cold water being thrown in your face. Jesus advises us that we are to think and act like **servants** –

simply doing what is expected of us – not to earn special favours from God, but because that is how Jesus models a life of faith. You recall that when two of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples, James and John, come to Jesus asking for special places of honour, Jesus responds by calling all the disciples together and reminding them that he has come as a servant – and that must be their attitude also.

So, Jesus explains, never tire of following the commands he has taught them – love God, love your neighbour, love one another, be generous, be hospitable. Share with the poor. Be thankful for what you have. And at the end of a long and tiring day, keep living out these guidelines. Will this make you a specially valued member of God’s family with special privileges? No. Because we are all to regard ourselves as servants.

But we are **already** specially valued members of God’s family! That’s the **grace** part – a gift we didn’t earn through our own efforts. This is both the blessing and the scandal of the gospel.

As a church community we regularly share Communion together – something else that energises our faith. The Communion liturgy encourages us to remember and celebrate the **whole of God’s story** from creation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to the future hope of ongoing life with God. Too often we see Communion as a rather serious and sombre remembering of **Jesus’ death**. Could I encourage you to listen to the words that tell a bigger story of God being for us and feeding us on our journey of faith? In the words of today’s liturgy – renewing, sustaining and making us whole, that we might be Christ’s body on earth, loving and caring in the world. In other words, living the ordinary – yet extraordinary – faith that both Jesus and Paul spoke about. It’s this faith that we put it into action every day – as God enables us.

Take this time to sing or listen to a great anthem of faith ... *Amazing grace!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jbe7OruLk8I>

or

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP95V-688hc>