

## **Sermon on Luke 17: 1-10**

### **Jesus' Pep Talk**

**Yesterday a dedicated bunch of football supporters gathered at the manse to watch the AFL grand final.**

It was a typically rowdy affair, but we watched somewhat spell bound as the Western Bulldogs won their first premiership in over 60 years.

Pretty good going.

During the breaks the cameras would sometimes pan to the coaches addressing their teams.

And of course they were laying it all on the line with them.

Impressing on them the gravity and importance of sticking to the plan, of playing as a team, and of being dedicated to the end.

They were giving their pep talks and imploring the players to respond.

The fact that at the final siren many lay prone on the ground, completely spent of energy says they heard the call.

The pep talks had worked and the result had eventuated, at least for one team. (but that's another story!

**Well in today's difficult Gospel reading we get Jesus giving his disciples a pep talk.**

**In this text we find a particularly piercing insight into the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.**

Context matters an awful lot in interpreting the Bible and we notice that this difficult collection of Jesus' sayings from Luke 17 is directed towards the disciples.

That is, it's Jesus' inner circle whom he has called to be his most intimate followers and from whom much is expected.

This little dialogue is not aired for the general public, but for the 12.

It's a little like Jesus' cabinet.

For the sake of public consumption there may be smiles all round and reassurances that all is well and everyone's on the same page.

Yet behind closed doors there are robust discussions which tackle the most difficult issues of the moment where there may be strong language and disagreement.

It is unlikely that this little collection of sayings will ever be considered one of the truly memorable passages of Scripture.

But just as life is not all about the high moments, it provides some direct teaching about faith and discipleship we do well to heed.

So, we are peering in today, eavesdropping on one of Jesus' cabinet meetings with his key advisors and followers.

Some of this makes for hard hearing, but as always, overall, like the disciples themselves, we are supposed to be encouraged.

With them, on hearing this passage, we too may say, 'increase our faith'.

Wrestle faithfully with it and I'm sure that's exactly what God will do.

**All of these sayings have underlying them the fact that faith is serious business.**

And it is demanding.

It requires much of us and there's no such thing as a fair weather Christian.

The first saying is about our human fragility and seems pretty confronting on a few levels. Stumbling blocks will come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.

In an equally memorable and shocking image Jesus says it would be better for anyone who causes someone to stumble to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck.

The purpose of such an exaggerated and graphic image is to shock and drive home the gravity of this concern.

We're all broken, we all sin and struggle, but putting stumbling blocks in front of others, especially those early in their faith journey, is particularly grievous.

The Greek word *scandalon* which means 'stumbling block' is where we get our modern English word 'scandal' from and it conveys the meaning well.

We are not to cause others to trip over into scandal.

William Barclay offers an analogy in a story he tells about a man who was dying.

The man was having remembrances and regrets of when he was a boy.

He used to go down to a common, a wide expanse of land, which was situated on a cross road.

When no-one was looking he would twist the road sign 90 degrees so any unsuspecting traveller would head off in exactly the wrong direction.

We will be judged harshly if we deliberately send others off on the wrong road, into the way of sin.

So watch yourselves, Jesus says, in a moment that reminds us that Jesus is not gentle, meek, and mild all the time.

There are hard edges and this is one of them, even as we remind ourselves that God is quick to forgive and slow to judge.

We are always to be mindful of others and attentive to their situation and context.

**The second saying impresses upon the disciples the need for being constantly disposed to forgiveness.**

We all remember Jesus' instruction to Peter to forgive not seven times, but 70x7, here we find the same message in slightly different terms.

Even if a brother or sister sins against you seven times in a day and seven times come back and repent you must forgive them.

Again the exaggeration (things must be pretty bad if the literal situation described here ever actually occurs) is designed to underline the point.

Forgiveness is a way of life which requires of us deep and enduring faith.

In abstract terms we can remind ourselves that God's forgiveness goes on and on, but when we're faced with imitating that same commitment in the face of repeated injury it becomes a little more real.

We need to treat this instruction with care as verses like this have been used sometimes to justify structures of abuse which ought not to be tolerated within any understanding of what is loving and just.

One such example is of the wife who experiences domestic violence over and over at the hands of her husband.

Quite obviously it would be wrong and a betrayal of Jesus' way and words to suggest this verse encourages her to keep enduring the abusive situation for the sake of forgiveness.

Patterns of abuse of any sort need to be broken.

And forgiveness in no way implies tolerance of manipulative and violent behaviour.

Yet the challenge of living into the way of forgiveness remains.

It was Alexander Pope way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> C who wrote, 'to err is human, to forgive divine', and it remains true.

To forgive is to participate in God's forgiving nature which has pardoned us all and given us the hope of new life.

That we ourselves have the opportunity to offer this gift to another is itself a deep grace of God, yet it takes great faith, which is perhaps why the very next verse records the disciples' impassioned plea – increase our faith.

To forgive we all need big faith, like an eternal reservoir of trust that we can draw on when we find forgiveness the most difficult of things, as we all do when we're confronted with the need to forgive.

**Fortunately for everyone, the disciples as well as us, just when faith sounds almost too demanding to bear, Jesus let's everyone catch their breath for a minute in the next saying.**

We all inhale deeply for a moment and take a break.

Even if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and plant yourself in the sea', and it will obey you.

God does much with little.

And even the smallest seed of faith is enough for God to work through us in wonderful and inspiring ways.

By this verse, although we should all seek to grow in our faith and deepen our relationship with Jesus, we see that what faith we have is a precious gift.

Just think of Peter and the troubles he faced in following Jesus.

He denied him three times and fled at the crucial moment, and yet through his mustard seed faith the church took its first steps in courage and trust on the way to the explosion of growth it experienced in those early halcyon days.

We can all look up and not be cast down as though we may sometimes feel our faith is not what it should be, through our doubts and struggles God sees strength enough to move mountains.

We all want our faith to increase, but like salt and light, a little bit goes a long way.

This is Jesus' reassurance.

We may not cast mulberry trees into the sea, again an exaggerated image highlights Jesus' point.

Yet day by day there are moments which require us to have faith, and even a little may well prove enough.

Every week at the community lunch, people file in and it's amazing the conversations that are had around faith and life.

Recently, one of our regulars noticed the chart on the wall which is recording the children's efforts to raise money by doing weekly chores for our church's sponsor child in Bangladesh.

During the next week our friend quietly slipped us \$10 to add to the effort.

Just a small gesture and yet it signifies a large faith, not just of him but of the children and indeed the whole church.

**The final saying in the text gets back to Jesus' demanding way of discipleship.**

We've had a nice little break with the reassurance of the power of even mustard seed faith and now it's back to the hard stuff.

This image, that of the slave and the master, is particularly problematic in our modern ears.

Jesus is impressing on the disciples that faith is not a merit based system like a reward chart on a child's bedroom.

We don't earn our way into God's good graces.

This was a key theme of the Protestant Reformation which the world will commemorate next year on its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

'Good works', said Martin Luther, 'Don't make a man good. But a good man does good works.'

Faith is not supposed to be seen as a credit account, but rather a joyful gift which outworks in good and loving deeds.

The image of the slave and the master, an image taken from the common life of the time, reinforces the notions of service and duty.

It cannot be seen as a condoning of the institution of slavery, nor as justifying any kind of systemic injustice, but again as a powerful image which conveys the underlying message in stark and direct terms.

The minute we start seeing faith in terms of reward (heavenly or earthly) for services rendered, we are misunderstanding it.

Be faithful, Jesus is saying to the disciples, because it is what you are called to be and nothing more.

Be servants, and be content that God is with you always and that that is enough for anyone.

**As he finishes his pep talk, Luke records in the very next verse perhaps exactly the reason for Jesus' direct and confronting approach with his closest followers.**

Now on his way to Jerusalem, the text says... the final quarter of Jesus' grand final was about to play out.

This was it, the end was in sight.

And so it was paramount he impress upon the disciples who they were called to be.

It was an urgent time.

It's not a passage that makes for easy reading, yet it contains deep truth if we are willing to hear and receive it.

Four sayings with four direct messages.

The good news is, though that we're not expected to follow this hard way on our own.

Jesus is with us for every step.

And while like the disciples there will undoubtedly be pep talks along the way, times when we need reminding that faith wasn't meant to be easy.

Times when we need reassurance that our faith can make a great difference.

Times when we need prompting to stand up again and follow, this hard way is also a joyful way as Sandra reminded us a couple of weeks ago.

So, let's take this way together, encourage one another at all times, and seek to fulfil God's calling for all of our days.

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**