

'Increase our faith.'

Luke 17 :1

Rev Peter Cornick

In the Queen's 2016 Christmas message, the Queen said:

On our own, we cannot end wars or wipe out injustice, but the cumulative impact of thousands of small acts of goodness can be bigger than we imagine.

Christ's example helps me see the value of doing small things with great love.

Her message drew inspiration from the thousands of unsung volunteers, carers and good neighbours, as well as the more noticeable emergency services. A multitude of small things, amounting to great love. Her speech concluded by noting how Christ, who loved much, started life in rather humble surroundings, remained relatively obscure and suffered for his love. Yet his example – his faith – has touched Queens, Paul, Timothy, me and you.

The Queen believed in the weight of many small acts of faith – by people of any faith. Some argue that individuals make no difference. Individual recycling for example, even mass public recycling, will have no impact unless corporate organizations change their ways.

But consider the impact one selfish man had on Friday in Paddington Basin. The rain was driving – it was hard to see where the canal stopped and the rain began. He threw his white coffee cup into the canal where the next passing duck might be choked – there were plenty of bins. The cup glowed so brightly against the wash of grey rain and water. One act, one individual sin; clear and exposed. Small things matter. So does great love.

By contrast a Scout volunteering in *The Queue*, was sifting through a bag of rubbish, diligently reading the packaging, and transferring each carton and bottle to the correct recycling bag. I watched him – for several minutes – I had the time. He was the sort of individual who inspired the woman lying close by in a coffin.

Small things, with great love.

The apostles cry, 'Increase our faith.' Give us more faith, better faith. If only I had the late Queen's faith, the Scout's faith, the faith of the person sitting next to me, I could do so much more. Could you? What would help you? 20% more – 50% more? What if the Parish put on twice as many Eucharists – would that increase your faith?

Jesus offers a saying about faith, the size of a mustard seed. Does this suggest that, whatever you do, however many times you pray, you are never going to increase the amount of faith you have – in proportion to the grace God offers you, to live your faith. Your faith will always be mustard seed sized.

The saying makes little sense of faith, unless you hear it in the context of what comes before it. The context of what Jesus says – his explanation of faith – is important. Here's the context:

Faith, is making sure you forgive your friend – your Christian friend even – if they repent and say sorry – even if they repent seven times – faith is forgiving – seven times.

'Increase our faith' Lord, the apostles – we – say, because we can't do that. Faith is too hard. We'd much rather hold the resentment we've held for years against that person on the Parochial Church Council because it makes us feel more righteous. And anyway, what would one individual act of forgiveness do; ... small things with great love?

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. (Luke 17: 6)

Just a little faith, would allow you to do the impossible.

This saying is not just about doing the small things which collectively, grow – acts of kindness and service – important though they are. Yes, pray more, yes attend more Eucharist's, yes learn more about your faith. But your faith will still be as small as a mustard seed, compared to your need of God's grace to fill, guide and direct your faith.

Rowan Williams observes that 'The gifts of the Spirit ... are far in excess of what we thought we needed or could cope with – what we thought we could 'bear'.'

We thought we needed more faith – more morning prayers, more meetings. We have no idea what we need from God, what grace, what love, what sacrifice – we cannot comprehend the God who will provide all the faith we need – all we can 'bear'. Our mustard seed faith is enough – God offers us the rest.

Rowan Williams, again, invites us to notice how simply sharing in the life of God reminds us 'how very human we are'; how our frailties and our mistakes are he says, 'steadily expos[ed] to the light of divine love and divine truth.' (Rowan Williams, *Candles in the Dark*, 2020)

And so, it gradually dawns on us, that sharing in the life of God – that small mustard seed of faith – helps us reflect on ourselves and our actions – even a coffee cup in a canal; helps us to do the impossible task of reconciliation – particularly with that irksome Christian on the Parochial Church Council.

We learn that faith is not about our own righteousness, how much faith we can earn, but about God's manifold and great mercies. Paul, writing to Timothy, says: 'join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, *not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.* (2 Timothy 1: 8-9)

The apostles, and we say: 'Increase our faith' Lord!

You have a mustard seed of faith already – small things with great love – rely on God's grace for the rest, for God will be faithful and will provide.
