

Twenty-seventh Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Hab 1:2-3; 2:2-4 2 Tim 1:6-8, 13-14
Ps 95 Lk 17:5-10

How long, O Lord? Increase our faith: the apostles' prayer

In the scriptures, there are the four major prophetic books, named after the great prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Then there are twelve minor prophetic books, some with familiar names, like Amos, Micah, Hosea; others with less familiar names, like Obadiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.

The prophets, major and minor, have much to teach us. They teach us about the history of Israel. They teach us about the ways of righteousness. They teach us about the holiness of God. They teach us about what God expects of us, about how we are to act individually and collectively as a people. The prophets have much to teach us. They even teach us about prayer.

Our first reading is taken from the book of the prophet Habakkuk, which is all of three chapters long, a very short prophetic book, but one that packs a punch even from its opening lines, which we heard today: *"How long, O LORD, must I cry for help and you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' and you do not intervene?"* Habakkuk prayerfully pours out his complaint that God is being complacent, failing to act, being slow to come to the help of his people and to show his holiness and righteousness. The wicked are prospering and causing all sorts of mischief, while the just are suffering. *"How long, Lord? Why won't you act?"*

Those who pray regularly with the scriptures are not surprised by the vehemence and insistence of Habakkuk's prayer before God. In the same breath, the prophet criticizes what he perceives to God's inaction and perhaps indifference and also reaffirms that he will wait, steadfast in hope, for the Lord to answer. It's a bold way of praying, don't you think, this upbraiding of God, this challenging God to do something, this demand for divine action. When we are exasperated, dare we express this before God? Dare we turn our exasperation on God himself and attempt to goad him into action?

It is, I agree, not a common way of expressing ourselves before the Lord, but there is a powerful scriptural warrant for such a prayer. One has only to search the bible for the expression "how long" to see that sometimes the scriptures have God expressing his exasperation with us – *How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?* (Ex 16:28) *How long will this people spurn me, not trust me, grumble against me?* (Num 14:11, 27) – and sometimes the scriptures express our vexation with God. By my count, in the book of Psalms alone, the psalmist cries out to God some fifteen or so times, asking him with impatience "how long." *How long, Lord, will you utterly forget me, hide your face from me? How long will my enemy triumph over me, jeer at me? How long will you be angry, Lord? How long until you relent? How long, O Lord?* (Ps 6:4; 13:2-3; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:5; 89:47; 90:13; 94:3-4; 119:84)

We are usually uncomfortable with being so bold and demanding before God in prayer, with expressing our impatience with him.

Deep down, we know how little we know and how God's plans and designs are sometimes unfathomable, inscrutable. We know that we are sinners who cannot hope to see as God sees and to understand fully ways of the Lord. And yet, from time to time, despite ourselves, a prayer of impatience wells up in our hearts and finds its way to our lips. Such a prayer is not necessarily irreverent or even out of place.

There is a remarkable scene in Robert Duvall's 1997 film, *The Apostle*, filmed here in Acadiana, where the main character, Sonny, a small-town Pentecostal preacher, played by Duvall, yells at God late one night because he's angry with God. Why? His wife cheated on him, left him, and turned his congregation against him, running him out. At his wit's end, he can't take it anymore, and for hours he yells at God because he's mad at God. He begs for peace. He admits he's a sinner. He reminds God that he is his servant. And he yells at God some more, until exhausted, he sleeps.

I was a twenty-one year old college student when I saw this film, and this scene in particular struck a chord in me even then. I found it authentic, human, sympathetic. It gave me hope. Here was the portrayal of a man of faith who was struggling in his faith, crying out to God, lashing out at God, a man who wanted to be a faithful servant but was weighed down by his own sinfulness, his own doubts, his own arrogance, and all the misfortunes that had befallen him. But he would not let go. He would not let his anger, his frustration separate him from God, even when he was angry

and frustrated at God! Sonny trusted that God could handle his anger, his lack of understanding, his little faith, his waywardness. There was trust. There was faith. This was prayer. This was friendship with God in all its authentic real-life grittiness – like something out of Dostoyevsky or Flannery O'Connor.

Perhaps our unease with such prayer – even though it has a perfectly solid biblical pedigree – is that we feel that if only our faith were stronger, we would trust God more and therefore have no need for such a prayer. If I had more faith, I would naturally trust in God more, and then come what may – good or ill – I would just surrender it all to God with confidence and remain in his peace. Yes. Of course, this is the case.

But it also happens that we can find ourselves without peace, our confidence shaken, and with the realization that our faith is more fragile than we would like to admit. In this case, we have the apostles' request to the Lord in today's Gospel: *"Increase our faith."* If the apostles could make such a request of Jesus, how much more can we and should we?

We want more faith, not so that we can boss around mountains or mulberry trees, but because faith brings with it belonging, confidence, trust, friendship. And these are the things that really matter to us in our relationship with God. We want to believe. We do believe, but we need help in overcoming our unbelief (see Mk

9:23-24). More is not always better, not always advisable. But when it comes to faith, asking for more seems to be a good thing.

It is good for me to ask God to increase my faith, precisely so that I can grow in friendship with him and overcome my unbelief. It is good that my personal faith should grow so that Christ can grow in me – and so that like St Paul, one day I may be able to say, “*yet I live, not longer I, but Christ lives in me*” (Gal 2:20). At that point, my friendship with God will have neared perfection, since I will have decreased and he will have increased in me to the point that my life is not my own, but I live only Christ, alive in me.

However, we should not fail to notice that, in this gospel passage, the apostles do not ask for an individual increase in faith. They ask Jesus, “Increase *our* faith.” And Jesus responds accordingly, quite literally, “If *y’all* have faith the size of a mustard seed, *y’all* would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey *y’all*.”

Faith is not merely a personal or individual matter. It also has a communal and ecclesial dimension. In the gospels, we see the Twelve sometimes striving and jostling for position amongst themselves. Yet for all that, when it comes down to it, they approach Jesus together, a band of brothers called together by the Lord, and as one they ask him to increase their faith: Lord, do this for *us*. It is as if they were saying: “What you, Lord, do for all of us together as one, you do equally for each of us on his own. And

since you have willed that we should be one, then together *we* ask, each for himself and each for each other, and all together for each other and all together for all, that you increase *our* faith.”

Increase our faith: this could be called the apostles’ prayer, just like we have the Apostles’ Creed. It is what all the apostles all together asked the Lord Jesus to do for them all together as one. The opening line of Psalm 133 immediately springs to my mind: “*How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together as one.*” The unity among the disciples of Jesus is not just a matter of correct doctrine, but is a unity based on faithfulness – to God and to one another – a unity also of hope and love. The Lord himself prayed for such unity among his disciples, and he did so at the Last Supper: “*Father, I pray ... that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me*” (Jn 17:20-21).

I cannot help but think how the apostles’ prayer must be something pleasing to God: “Lord, increase our faith, so that one in faith, we may move not mountains or mulberry trees, but the minds and hearts and souls of others to believe in you as we believe in you, so that we may be true witnesses of your goodness and glory and the love by which you wished to redeem and save the world.”

Lord, we do believe. Help our unbelief.

Increase our faith. Amen.