

## **Luke 17:5-10**

<sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." <sup>7</sup>

"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? <sup>8</sup> Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? <sup>9</sup> Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? <sup>10</sup> So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Perhaps we can summarize today's meditation with this question: "What does it mean to have Christian faith?" What does it mean to be a Christian? These are so simple and foundational questions that it seems everyone should know the answer. But so often we don't.

There are not too many things in this world which are more misunderstood than the question about Christian faith, about being Christian. We'll try to look for the answer in today's Gospel text.

But first, what do people say, what does it mean to be a Christian? There are a few widespread misunderstandings, which people keep repeating and repeating. And we need to remind them again and again, that this *is not* what being a Christian is about. What are these misunderstandings?

One of them, that Christians are these irrational people who when they can't explain something they claim that God did it. But then come smart and knowledgeable people and explain everything rationally.

Nothing is further from truth than this. These knowledgeable and rational people should first spend a minute trying to learn what is Christian understanding about the reality.

Christian understanding about this reality is not formed on the basis of lack of knowledge, but on the basis of comprehensible knowledge, logical and experiential, which by the way is both rational and verifiable.

We believe that this wonderful Universe has Creator, almighty, omniscient and benevolent, we believe that all life in its incredible complexity and diversity is created, ordered and sustained by Him.

We believe that human beings have a very special place in Creator's plan, that we are unique in a way that we can comprehend and understand this Universe, that we can

learn how to rule it. That we have our consciences wonderfully made, which tell us how to know good, even when our will drifts towards evil.

We trust all of this not only because it is written in a very special book, not only because it corresponds to reality around us and our experience, but also because it was confirmed by a man two millennia ago, who claimed to be the Son of God, who came not to live, but to die for us, who did everything as He foretold, who was crucified and the third day He rouse again from the dead.

Thousands heard Him before it happened, both friends and enemies, and hundreds and hundreds witnessed with their own eyes His victory over death, His resurrection. I guess you believe and trust a person who knows everything, who has a power over everything and who shows His love to you, by giving up His life so that you can live.

Christian understanding about this world is both historical and rational, and as we can see, this understanding has changed the world for better. Good things in contemporary world which we enjoy on a daily bases, like good and just laws and governments, science and technology, medicine and education, value of human life, equality, freedom, justice, and many others are direct results of Christian efforts, changing this world by teaching God's wisdom and by sacrificial service to others.

Other widespread misunderstanding about Christian faith is that to be a Christian is to live a good and moral life. If you do so, you are a good Christian. The paradox of this misunderstanding is that even if you don't have Biblical understanding about reality, you still can be considered a good Christian, if only you live a moral life. According to at least some kind of standards.

It almost seems that it doesn't matter what your understanding about this reality is, for more or less similar moral principles you can find in many different cultures. Just be a nice person, accept all people as they are, that's all you are expected to do. And in fact, you can do all of this even not being a Christian. So why bother?

**What** does today's Gospel text tell about being a Christian? "The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"'" What were they asking for? What is meant by these words in Luke's gospel? Obviously not the first two misunderstandings which we just discussed. The apostles were not asking for strengthening their superstition. They were not asking for a help to be a nice people either.

Right before these words Luke has recorded Jesus telling what His disciples, including us, need to strive for. "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! [...] Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." (Luke 17:1,3)

Jesus was instructing His disciples how to live in relations with God the Father and with one another. They were to strive to lead a holy life, a life for which God had

created them. To live it in a way that it would give a good testimony to others and would help to restore the goodness of this world.

Besides, they had to care not just for their own lives, but also for the lives of other Christians, helping them to stay on the right track, rebuking them when they err, and setting them free from the bondage of sin by forgiving, when they repent.

In Luke's gospel 'faith' is understood as one's perception of this reality that enables, that motivates and leads to faithful behavior as demanded by Jesus. When the apostles were asking to increase their faith, they were asking Jesus to help them both to understand God's ways and to live accordingly.

The apostles realized that to live as Jesus instructed is quite a difficult task. Temptations come daily. So often they mask as good things. Besides, we daily sin against others in thought, word and deed, and others against us, and forgiveness is not something we want to grant naturally. The apostles asked for Jesus help, for they understood that we can't do it on our own.

The apostles asked to increase their faith, "And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." These are strange words, when we hear them. And they are very often misused. But they didn't seem that strange to the apostles when they heard them.

There is other place in the gospel according Matthew where Jesus says that "if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." (Mat 17:20)

By these figures of speech Jesus says that if you have faith you can do 'what seems impossible'. Your faith will help you to accomplish what otherwise would seem to be impossible. Jesus was not trying to say that if only we have faith we can do whatever we can imagine. He was saying that if we have faith we'll be able to do what He has instructed to do, and what otherwise would seem to be mission impossible.

In context of today's Gospel, it would be living a holy life and restoring God's creation by means of forgiveness in Jesus name. For whenever we forgive what has been done against us by offensive and harmful words, by aggressive or indifferent attitude, by sinning against us, and even more - when we ask for forgiveness when we are guilty, it helps to restore not just our relations but also peace and goodness in the fabric of God's creation. This is what we are called to do as Christians. This is where we need Jesus help, for it doesn't come easy. Not for us.

That's why it is so important to notice where does this faith come from. Does it come from hearing God's commands? Or from our good will? Or from wisdom of surrounding culture? No, it is a gift of God. "Increase our faith!" the apostles asked.

The apostles didn't say, 'all clear, we know what to do, let's do it'. They knew that to be a Christian required more than they could deliver on our own. They needed faith. We need faith. Faith that is similar to a mustard seed.

It doesn't mean a little faith, it means faith that can grow and grow and grow, taking over our lives, helping to do what seems impossible. Caring for others, rebuking when a brother or a sister err, forgiving and asking for forgiveness.

We can't have such faith on our own, but if we keep watering it with the living water, that is, with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, if we take care of our faith by listening to what Jesus is teaching us, by receiving His life giving body and blood, we can experience how our faith changes everything.

Our thoughts, our priorities, our attitudes, our actions. If we remain in Jesus presence, in His words, our lives are transformed. We are freed from selfishness, we are enabled to forgive as Jesus has forgiven us, and to care not only for our friends, but also for those whom the world would call our enemies.

**Then** Jesus tells the parable about the servant who returns from the field and then is asked to serve the dinner for his master and only then he can eat and drink himself. When servant has done everything he was asked to do, he doesn't expect any particular reward, for he only has done his duty.

Reading this parable with 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners eyes we may think – o, poor guy, he is required to work in the field, and then to serve his master and only then he gets to eat and drink himself and at the end there is no gratitude at all.

This is not how Jesus listeners would hear it. If you were a servant in a rural area in Jesus times, you had had your responsibilities. In this case they included both a work on the field and also a service at home. Usually servants would return from the field sometimes in afternoon, that would be a time for lunch. They would prepare the meal for the master and then they would enjoy it themselves.

What Jesus described, was the most usual situation for his listeners. They would all easily agree with what was said. That there was no need for any specific gratitude, for the servant had done only what was required from him.

Besides, if you were a servant, your master was responsible for you. He not only would provide you with work, but also would take full responsibility caring for all your needs. This parable doesn't exclude a situation when the master actually thanks his servant for his faithful service. He may as well have done it.

The point is, when you have done what is your duty, it doesn't merit you anything extra. So what does this parable help to understand in relation with what we discussed before, regarding being a Christian?

When God has created us for specific life, when we undertake our responsibilities, when we do them faithfully, they don't merit us anything special. It is not like doing good things and being a moral person would merit us God's favor. If you only do what is your duty, why would you expect to receive a gratitude?

Our problem is that we often don't know what our duties are and moreover, even when we know them, we struggle to live accordingly. We desire to go our ways. This is why the apostles asked to increase their faith. So that they could live up to Jesus demands. Strengthened and lead by God's wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Not to merit God's grace, but to be able to live as those who already had received it.

**The last** thing to clarify is about this master. Who was the master in this parable? Who was the master for the apostles and who is the master for us, Christians? And what kind of master we have?

We already explained that once you were a servant in Jesus time your master would take care of all your needs. However the Master in Luke's Gospel moves beyond this regular practice. This Master, who taught the apostles and whose words we read in the Bible, is much more superior than any other human master could ever be.

Of course, He provides for us everything we need. As we say in our table grace together with psalmist: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing." (Ps. 145:15-16)

Our Master provides for us our daily bread, even if we are far from being faithful servants. He Himself teaches us and enables us to strive for life according His holy will. But this is not all. He has promised that when He returns, He will invite us to His table and He will serve us, as He already did two millennia ago.

This is what it means to be a Christian. To live with this Master, gladly receiving everything from Him, with His help carrying out our duties, and knowing, that when He returns, He, the Lord of all Lords and King of all kings will Himself serve us. This is how we live, this is what we hope. This is our faith. Let's appreciate and rejoice in it!

Amen.