

Sermon preached at Eaglehawk Uniting Church
6th October 2013 by Rev Ralph Clarke
Readings 1 Timothy 1:1-14; Lk 17:5-10

There's been a bit of talk about people's faith recently. Brownlow medallist Garry Ablett Jnr has highlighted the importance of his faith in God, as did Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd during the recent election campaign. For the last month our readings from Luke's gospel have been about faith and that theme is there in the readings again today.

Today's readings talk about the **FRAILTIES** of faith. Paul calls on Timothy to guard his faith as he carries out his ministry. In Luke chapter 17, Jesus apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. Luke uses the word "apostle" (meaning one sent) rather than disciple (meaning learner). This may indicate that Luke is thinking the greatest danger to faith comes not in the formative stages of faith but when faith is more mature and has to stand up to the pressures of ministry. In any case, Luke is talking to Christians here.

The call to "increase our faith" sounds like the apostles felt their faith was inadequate or lacking something. They want their faith enlarged or strengthened. Jesus follows this with a story about a slave who came home from work every day and still has to get a meal for his owner. The slave sees it all as his duty. The story ends with encouragement to think of ourselves as "worthless slaves" who do only what we ought to do.

I see this as Jesus warning Christians not to focus too much on ourselves, our abilities, or the lack of them, our achievements or merit. Jesus says the **SIZE** of faith is not important. Even small faith can achieve great things. Jesus points us away from faith that depends on our abilities, to a faith that relies on God's goodness. The great Martin Luther talked about faith coming not from our goodness, but from God's grace in Christ. Faith is a gift not something we have created.

The more we focus on our own lack of faith, the more that takes us into ourselves and risks faith becoming a fairly private thing. What's important is not the greatness of our faith but God's faithfulness to us, and Jesus acceptance of us before we have even deserved that.

When the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith he tells them to just get on with being servants of God. Jesus points us away from faith that depends on us, to a faith that is concerned only with sharing in God's mission. Often, great people are seen to be self serving, and those who are selfless are seen to be unimportant. Being God's people means we are already more important than we can make ourselves to be, and free to just be servants. Jesus warnings at the beginning of this chapter about not being a stumbling block to others, and to keep offering forgiveness, point to service being service to others, even to those who may not count for much in our eyes.

Important as it is to focus on God's goodness rather than our own inadequacies, I don't want to minimise the importance of faith that feels inadequate. A felt lack of faith can be a very real thing. It can come from somewhere deep within ourselves where we struggle with our own self worth. It can come from feeling that our training, gifts or skills is inadequate for the tasks we have to do. Some Christians are feeling like this as they grapple with the challenges facing churches in Australia. However this felt lack must never be allowed to make us self centred, or cautious in our concern for others.

There are lots of things that can leave us feeling that our faith is insufficient or weak. We are living in a society where fewer people claim to be Christians, and where fewer people have respect for us as Christians. People seem to feel less loyalty to past history or traditions and are concerned to do only what has meaning for them now. Where faith is equated with the meaning we can see, then it is our own creation rather than a gift of God.

Particular understandings of faith may also be threatened. Some feel that faith requires them to feel strong and confident, sure of ourselves and our relationship with God. For others, faith by definition involves some uncertainty, struggle, risk and the feeling of having to straddle a huge gap between God and the society in which we live. These different perspectives create tension, uncertainty and fear for some.

Some people feel their faith has been wounded by things that have happened to them. These things can be as diverse as tragedies like losing a partner or a child, kids leaving home, loss of a job, having to move to a new Congregation, friends ridiculing you, not getting on with your fellow church members, tiredness, having your beliefs questioned or feeling as if God has let you down. It is important in the church to name the things that wound us and to support each other in our struggles with all these things.

Yet in the end, the struggles of faith must always be not to enhance ourselves, but so we can follow Jesus in being there for others.