

Sermon Archive 556

Sunday 5 October, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Luke 17: 5-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Timothy Scur was a person of remarkable faith. About eighty years ago, he said to his willow tree "you be uprooted and planted in the sea"; and because of his faith, that's what the tree did. So now camera-toting pilgrims flock daily down to the South end of Lake Wānaka to see the tree in the sea. "Behold what faith can do" they say. "O, would that we could be more like Tim! Lord, increase our faith."

Actually, that's not quite accurate. The local word is that Tim Scur, a local farmer, was building a fence down to the lake - Number 8 wire strung between wooden posts. One of the posts just started to grow. When the level of the lake rose (over the centuries Lake Wānaka has fallen and risen), the fence post became a tree in a lake. Not a sign of great faith at all, but the ordinary work of a farmer. It makes you wonder, doesn't it, about the line between miraculous signs and ordinary work.

-ooOoo-

In the general shape of Luke's gospel, by now the disciples have seen Jesus do a lot of miracles; but most recently he's been telling them some deep and searching stories about the "kingdom" - the prodigal son, the dishonest manager, the rich man and Lazarus. The stories have the feel to them that they're turning the world upside down, challenging long-held, widely accepted beliefs about being religious. But because they're stories, rather than instructions, they have this misty, mysterious "suggesting" about them - clouds rather than widgets - things that float rather than present themselves to be grasped. I don't know - and maybe **they** don't know. He's also told them that faith is about picking up a big, heavy cross, too heavy to carry, and carrying it. O, and by the way, doing it while you hate father and mother, wife and even life itself. These disciples are people bound to be wondering whether any of this is

achievable, given the faith they almost have but feel they lack. No wonder they ask him to increase their faith. Small people, big challenges; increase our faith.

Small people, big challenges, trying to keep the faith . . .

Hardly a week goes by these days when I don't have someone express to me a sense of impotence before the issues of the world. Wars in Europe and the Middle East, Russian aircraft pressing the edges of NATO to see what it does. Given our current resources, what can we do to keep the faith? In the United States, common ground has disappeared and insatiably unhappy tribes cease even to be able to talk. And the mood from it spills through the internet connections into our own time and place. It begins to do strange things in our national psyche. Given our current resources, what can we do to keep the faith? Out of grief over the death of her husband, but not out of insanity (so the court found), a Korean woman in Auckland poisons her children, suitcases them, and abandons the storage unit. No one represents her in the trial, and she utters not a single word - almost like she makes no defence in her own defence. What must it be like to have moved beyond speaking? Given our current resources, what can we do to keep the faith?

Small people, big challenges, trying to keep the faith. I think we can understand why disciples might say to their Lord "Lord, increase our faith". His response is two-fold.

The first fold is to assure them that even a little faith can make a great difference. The faith the size of a tiny mustard seed can cause a tree to "up its roots" and make a home in the sea. You don't need a lot of faith - he seems to say. (Sometimes the fence post just becomes a tree?)

He then speaks about a slave who has spent the day working in the field. A bit of ploughing the ground. A bit of tending the sheep. These are the tasks assigned to the slave in the field. And when the field day is done, and the slave comes inside, there is no miraculous, class-breaking reception, just work in the field replaced with work at the table. Put on the apron, prepare the meal, serve the family with food. They ask him to increase their faith, and he presents them with the

image of someone just doing what they're used to doing. It's meant to be about increased faith, and he gives them a picture of someone doing what they're appointed to do. What's he doing here?

Could it be that he's trying to break their thinking about some necessary connection between faith and the spectacular? What would it mean if the beautiful tree, planted in the sea, came to be simply because the slave was doing his ordinary work, digging a fence post. The iconic tree comes to be loved, to be visited by many, to be appreciated for all its shape and curious presentation, because some guy in gumboots dug a hole.

In his article, *Everyday Faith*, David Lose, a Lutheran minister from Minneapolis, writes:

Faith, as Jesus describes it, is just doing your job, just doing your duty, not because of any sense of reward but simply because it needs doing. Faith, in other words, is doing what needs to be done right in front of you and this, Jesus says, the disciples can already do. Folks who feel daunted by discipleship need to hear that sometimes faith can be pretty ordinary. That's what Jesus means, I think, by saying that if they had the faith even of a mustard seed, they could uproot and move a mulberry tree — that it really doesn't take all that much faith to be, well, faithful. Even the simplest things done in faith can have a huge impact.

At the same time, there are a whole lot of people in our congregation who may feel absolutely nothing like the disciples. It's not that they're overwhelmed by the tasks of Christian discipleship, it's more that they don't even think about it. For them, going to church and perhaps generally being a good person is pretty much what it means to be a Christian. It would never occur to them that being a good friend, or working at jobs to keep food on the table or keep the world running, or paying your taxes and voting for people who spend those taxes well, or any of the other ordinary stuff we do every day has anything to do with the Christian faith.

That's what David said.

Some weeks ago, we thought about Paul the octopus, and how he and many of his brothers and sisters are eaten by us. And in the prayers that followed the sermon, Lesley helpfully observed that so long as we do consume meat, some living creatures will die for other living creatures. And it's not a narrowly human thing - it's how the whole of the natural world works - the predator and the prey. After the service, I had a number of conversations that touched on how Muslim people will only eat meat that is Halal. Halal meat is no different from regular meat physically, except that the animal is slaughtered only after a prayer of thanksgiving has been offered - thanksgiving for God's goodness and thanksgiving for the animal's life. There is no faith-oriented requirement not to eat - but there *is* a requirement to eat gratefully. There is something about eating in the knowledge that eating is a privilege, served by the sacrifice of another living being. It's the attitude we bring to what we do.

Do you think that something similar is going on here? It's not that we are called to do extraordinary things (move the mulberry tree), but to rediscover that the ordinary things in our lives can be done in faith - with the right kind of attitude, right kind of heart? With sacred gratitude, in the knowledge that it's an offering to God? Plough a field, tend to the sheep. Put on the apron, serve the food; discover somehow that this is *faith* at work . . .

-ooOoo-

Tim Scur was a farmer who dug a hole for a fence post. The Wānaka tree is famously beautiful. "Be uprooted", we say "and be planted in the sea". Jesus dares us to consider that all manner of things can be done in faith.

A moment of quiet.