

The 27th Sunday of Year C: Perseverance combined with boldness.

1st Reading: Habakkuk 1:2-3 & 2:2-4: Be patient! God's help will come.

**2nd Reading: 2 Tim 1:6-8+13-14: Paul reminds Timothy of ordination gifts
Gospel; Luke 17:5-10: Like servants, we must stick to the task in hand.**

If I were being naughty (perish the thought....) I would say that these 3 Lenten-style readings were too miserable for the Autumn season. But, if I were being honest, I would say that they are about being adult and mature when life is difficult. That way, they could offer useful lessons to some politicians at this time of financial emergency. However, I don't discuss party politics in homilies.

The first reading is from the short book of the prophet Habakkuk, this being the only Sunday in the church year when he is read. We think he lived in Jerusalem about 600 BC - the same time as the prophet Jeremiah. It was a tense period, when people were expecting invasion from the north. This did happen - about 13 years later; many were to be exiled to Babylon, where they would be stuck for more than two generations, about 70 years. Thus, Habakkuk gives an air of impending doom (as you'd expect in any country awaiting invasion); he expresses doubt about God's willingness - or even his ability - to help. I suppose that the prophet's faith allows him to seem 'annoyed' at this lack of action by God to protect his own people. Even so, the implication of this is serious: if God cannot (or will not) help in any meaningful way, what is the point of religion at all? Many have asked this same, hard question down the years. But near the end of this Sunday's reading, Habakkuk accepts God's promise that he will intervene: "If it (ie, help) comes slowly, wait, for come it will, without fail. The upright man will live by his faithfulness."

It is amazing that Habakkuk's blunt questioning of God has been put into the Scriptures as Divine Revelation, then passed down the centuries to us. In a less controversial way, St Paul wants his young bishop Timothy to be equally bold: "God's gift was not a spirit of timidity.... So never be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord, or ashamed of me for being his prisoner." I suggest that another word for "ashamed" might be "embarrassed", because in today's climate, many seem to be embarrassed at being called "Catholic" or "Christian". This was certainly the case for many teenagers when I was in the Newcastle area: even if they were from balanced and practising RC families, there was a sort of shame in being acknowledged as 'believing' or 'Mass-going'. To use old-style language, it destroyed their "street-cred" among their peer-group. For older people, the

problem stems from the child-abuse scandal, or from the media portraying faith as being only for the very young, sad, naive or elderly.

In St Paul's advice to Timothy, the antidote to the "spirit of timidity" is the "Spirit of power, love and self-control" He obviously means the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the sense of empowerment that this Spirit can offer. Also, he wants Timothy to "keep as his pattern the sound teaching" he heard from Paul. I suggest that, by this, he means a grown-up and sensible religious belief. If faith never gets beyond childish language, music or emotion, then it won't survive in the adult world of today.

In the gospel, Jesus says two things that may shock us. The first is hyperbole – a deliberate exaggeration to make his point. He claims that if our faith were the size of a mustard seed (that is, VERY small) we could order a tree to uproot itself and be thrown into the sea. This is obviously not to be taken literally – life does not work like that. But he does mean that a strong faith is a formidable thing, and can achieve good results. We can think of some of the great missionaries of the past: they overcame terrible hardship to plant the faith in distant lands – areas which are now where our church is at its strongest.

His second idea is less popular, and is about having the faith to stick to our duty when we would rather not bother. He mentions an employer whose servant has been working in the field. When the servant gets home, the employer still expects him to prepare his supper, then get washed and changed while the employer eats the meal. (No RMT-style trade unions in those days...) Jesus' point is that 'duty' can be hard, and that all of us must sometimes just stick at it, because there is no alternative.

I suggest that this weekend's readings give us a double picture of the God we worship. The last paragraph refers to Jesus' teaching that duty is a thing to which at times we must simply stick, and get on with the job. ("We are merely servants, we do no more than our duty.") That's how life is, and sensible adults know it. Unfortunately, this is hard and unpopular nowadays, with so much stress on 'feelings', and the right of individuals & small groups to have their way against the needs of everybody else. On the other hand, this same God lets us see Habakkuk complaining strongly against him and Paul telling Timothy not to be 'timid'. As I said at the start. These readings aren't happy, but they do deal with difficult topics – an adult religion for grown-up people. *Fr Jim Dunne.*