

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Habakkuk 1.2-3; 2.2-4)

The Righteous Person lives by Faith

This fascinating passage has two entirely different meanings; the first is the meaning of the original Hebrew prophet, the second is the meaning of 'faith' in the gospel passage with which this first reading pairs.

The drift of the passage in the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk is endurance. 'Make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it' - that is, as you whisk past, running your Marathon, you see an encouraging placard in the crowd, 'Keep it up!', 'Keep going!' So the message in the last line is that, however tough and unpromising the course, the righteous person lives by endurance, perseverance, fidelity.

The message was originally intended to keep up the spirits of the Jews as the Babylonian armies approached: it will be tough, but stick it out, for the Lord will not desert you. However, the Apostle Paul is using the Greek translation of the Hebrew text - of course, he is writing in Greek - which reads 'the righteous person lives by fidelity/faith'. Paul uses the text in Romans 1.17 and Galatians 3.11 to prove that justification is by faith. Luther adds a further complication by adding, without justification, 'alone': 'The righteous person lives by faith alone.' For Paul, faith expresses itself in action.

Question:

How does Christian hope make life different?

Second reading:

(2 Timothy 1.6-8, 13-14)

The Sound Teaching of the Gospel

Today we start with the first of four Sunday readings from Second Timothy. The letters addressed to Timothy and Titus, those two central members of Paul's staff, are generally considered not to have been written by Paul. However, they are all part of the inspired word of God, and a handful of reputable scholars considers that Second Timothy is indeed by Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 16.10-11, the Corinthians are urged to treat Timothy gently, and here again the author seems to be encouraging Timothy himself against timidity; perhaps he was a naturally hesitant person.

One of the principal emphases of all three letters is the adherence to 'sound teaching': they are encouraged not to show initiative but to keep to the tradition already established. This is, of course, already implied by the laying on of Paul's hands, for a Jewish rabbi would learn much by heart, and at the end of his training was commissioned to carry on the tradition in the name of his own teacher. Such methods would have been important for the preservation of the teaching of Jesus during the Pauline period, before it came to be written down in the gospels.

Question:

Is it sufficient to keep to what we have been taught?

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Gospel:

(Luke 17.5-10)

The Reward of Faith

The two sections of this gospel reading appear at first sight to be entirely separate: the first about faith, the second about the reward of service; but they do fit together.

The faith required consists not in reciting a creed but in hanging on by one's fingertips, through thick and thin, to God's power and will to save. In nothing else is there any hope, not in my own power or ability.

That is why, in the second section, we have no right to expect any sort of reward as our due from God. Our work is valueless; only our admission of helplessness and our trust in God's power can save us.

However, not all parables should be taken as allegories. The severe master here is not necessarily God, any more than the master who in another parable praises his crooked steward. When we hear the unyielding command of the master to the slave to expect nothing and to set about serving at supper, we cannot forget that at the Last Supper it was Jesus who put on his apron and washed his disciples' feet. We may be worthless slaves, but this gives us confidence that our Master ministers to us.

Question:

Do I really serve anyone? Am I a useless servant?
