

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity  
October 6, 2019

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Sometimes the Church's lectionary does us a disservice. Because it is only a portion of the Holy Bible, the lectionary necessarily crops a passage of scripture at one end or the other of the appointed reading. If we didn't do that, we'd be reading the whole Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John at every Mass! But there *are* occasions when a longer reading than the one appointed would make the whole passage more understandable. And this is a reminder the lectionary is never a substitute for Bible reading.

Today's gospel text would have better served if lengthened by adding the previous passage. Then we would understand the disciples did not say to Jesus "increase our faith" *out of the blue*. Their request takes place in Chapter Seventeen of St Luke's Gospel. By this time the whole Jesus cavalcade is on the way to Jerusalem and its destiny with the Passion. In Holy Week the followers of Christ would need every ounce of courage and wisdom in order to survive the ordeal. Survive they did, but we have the impression on Easter Sunday night they were planning their escape when the Risen Lord joined them and changed everything. One great danger was the disciples would stumble and get tripped up, either by hostile people, or by their own sheer offense at the Cross of Christ. And we all know that being under fire, being accused and accursed, builds a strong urge to strike back. But the Master firmly said *no*.

All right. That is what sets up the moment when the disciples asked Jesus to "increase our faith." And right here the Lord did not seem to give them much help! Of course all along, He had been building their ability to receive and accept the divine revelation. There are those tantalizing references to the many quiet times alone Jesus spent with His Twelve closest followers. But a request for increased faith is tantamount to admitting a lack of real faith at all. We cannot expect Almighty God is going to full us up as if we were an empty glass waiting for the milk!

So what the Lord does here is give encouragement by way of a *simile*: a grain of mustard seed. The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds. Yet each seed has in it potential or great growth. The seed looks so small you think it is a speck of dust. If you went to your neighborhood farm store and bought a packet of mustard seeds

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and opened it, you might at first think the contents were missing. But the crucial thing when compared to a speck of dust is not that both are of small size. The crucial thing is the seed is *alive* and the dust is dead.

In the spring, after your flowering bulbs have bloomed and you dig them up, it is sometimes hard to tell if they are any good for replanting in the fall. The ones that crumble like dust are easy to discard. But others look to be alive. Some of these, when replanted, come to nothing. But others come up and into bloom the next spring after lying dormant in the winter ground. The important thing is not the size of the bulb or even its appearance, but whether it is dead or alive. A dead bulb, even if cultivated and cared for, will still be dead. No amount of bone meal will change the situation. It is the same, Our Lord teaches, with faith. And those whose faith may be small, or seems on appearance to be dormant, nevertheless contains within *the power to grow*.

So we must learn to have faith *in our faith*. That sounds strange to say but it is true. And we must have faith in the fact of faith, if not the right ordering of faith, in others. We must have faith in our efforts to cultivate faith in others, just as we do in the bulbs we plant in the ground. Just as with our flower garden, where we may not see any result until spring, so too there is a springtime for souls. It is, after all, God Who gives the increase.

Our Lord Jesus teaches that this faith is no special virtue attained by traveling the *via Dolorosa* on our knees. Rather, it is a *natural virtue*. That is to say, all men created are equipped with faith. Faith is part of the package of what it means to be human. Sure, this natural endowment of faith can be transplanted, stifled, mutilated, and manipulated. In the news for months have been the peaceful, and increasingly not-so-peaceful, demonstrations in Hong Kong for governmental autonomy. But the people in the streets are not the results of absorbing the writings of political action committees, or under the sway of charismatic street organizers. At its root the motivation comes from the natural equipment called faith.

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No one is entitled to a special reward from God because he *has* faith, but what he *does* with faith. Faith is a natural thing, Our Lord says, as it is for hearts to seek God. Why? Because we have been designed for this very thing.