



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22
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“Increase our faith!”

This is one of those moments in the gospels where we can all strongly identify with the disciples. “Increase our faith!” It is so easy, isn't it, to look around the world and think, as my grandmother used to say, that everything is going to hell in a hand basket. Look at the headlines. Protests in Burma, led by peaceful Buddhist monks, brutally suppressed by a military junta. The continuing slaughter in Darfur, including most recently the murder of African peacekeeping forces. Our own nation's involvement in torture, which is so completely counter to everything we believe the United States stands for. Or the war in Iraq, where we hoped to do good, but which seems to go more and more wrong, our young men and women dying by the thousands, Iraqis dying by the tens of thousands, and no solution in sight. Where is God in all this? We may well identify with Habakkuk's lament: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” How should we as Christians respond to the mess the world seems to be in?

The lessons for today give us some answers. Faith seems to demand two things, patience and action. First: patience. We are impatient creatures by nature, and I find Americans to be particularly impatient by nature. Get in there, find a solution, fix the problem! Roll up your sleeves, and get to work! We assume that there is a solution, and, if everyone would just listen to us, it will all work out. Then, when it doesn't work out, we get disgusted and want to quit. But the lessons for today remind us that our time is not God's time. We are mortal. We die. Our time is short. But, as Habakkuk says, “Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? You shall not die.” God is immortal; his time is eternal.

Therefore, we are called, as the psalm says, to “be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” We need to believe, to have faith that God's purpose is working in the world, even if we, in this moment, can't see it. To quote Habakkuk again, “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”

But the patience we are called to exercise is not passive. It is active patience. We are not to sit on our hands and expect God to fix everything. No; if we again take our cue from the psalm, we are to put our trust in the Lord and *do good*, commit our way to the Lord and put our trust in him. Trust, yes, but also do good. That's the second part of what the lessons teach this morning. We are God's instruments in the world. God calls us to do God's will, to actively pursue his purposes.

That may seem like a hard assignment. How can we be God's instruments in the world? How do we avoid giving in to despair, throwing up our hands, and quitting? 1 Timothy helps us here. "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." We have, through our baptism, God's spirit within us. That spirit strengthens us and enables us to do God's work in the world. We feed that spirit every Sunday at the communion table, receiving God's perfect gift, the bread and the wine, Christ's real presence in us and among us. Our spirit is more powerful than anything the world can throw at us, for it is the Holy Spirit.

One of my heroes in the faith is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He is one of the elders in Darfur right now, speaking truth to power. I have met Tutu personally, and I have never forgotten the power of the spirit within him. Let me share with you the circumstances. It was Christmas Eve, 1989, in Jerusalem. Tutu was there as the guest of St. George's Anglican Cathedral; I was there on a fellowship and attending St. George's. The Cathedral was packed at the midnight service, with Tutu and lots of other bishops and deans participating. Suddenly, about halfway through the service, the dean of the cathedral announced that there had been a bomb threat against Archbishop Tutu, and would we please evacuate the cathedral quickly and quietly. We did, and then we milled around in the cathedral courtyard, uncertain as to what to do next. The clergy went aside to consult, and the Bishop of Jerusalem came out and announced that we would not let any threat disrupt our joyful celebration of Christ's nativity. We would finish the service out in the courtyard. He boomed out, "The peace of the Lord be always with you!" We, still nervous and uncertain, muttered back, "and also with you." At that, Tutu plunged into the crowd and began exchanging the peace.

All of a sudden, I got it. The threat was aimed at him, but he was absolutely unafraid. He put himself in God's hands, and went on doing what God called him to do. It didn't matter what happened to him; what mattered was that God's will be done. I wish I had adequate words to describe to you that moment. Tutu absolutely embodied the attitude that Jesus speaks of when he says, "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Now, perhaps you are saying to yourself, "But I certainly am no Desmond Tutu!" Me neither! But we can use him as a model of faith, the faith that is patient and active, that faith that flows from the spirit that God gives us, a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. If we all rely on that spirit, our faith *will* increase, and we will be, more and more, the instruments of God's purpose in the world.