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A homily for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, October 2, 2016 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Habakkuk 1:2–3, 2:2–4

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95:1–2, 6–9 | **Response:** Psalm 95:8

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1:6–8, 13–14

Gospel Acclamation: 1 Peter 1:25

Gospel Reading: Luke 17:5–10

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Good morning everyone. We see from the First Reading, that when we pray or talk to God, we can be honest with him. In fact it is best that we are. In today's first reading we read from the Prophet Habakkuk "how long shall I cry for help" – a more honest remark we might not find. Here is someone who has been crying for help, indeed he tells the Lord that wickedness, violence, neglect of the Law, and injustices surround him, and he feels entitled to a response because he has not done these things. So he complains "how long shall I cry for help" and we are told the Lord says "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith." Faith in this context is more an attitude or way of living. It is not some intellectual assent, or some feeling or empty hope in the face of contrary evidence. In Biblical and rabbinical literature, "faith" does not mean belief in a dogmatic sense, but either (a) faithfulness or (b) confidence and trust in God, in His word, or in His messenger. So it is more about our attitude. Jesus, in today's Gospel talks about the correct attitude we need – grateful humility. But what I think is important in this reading is that this response is in the context of a prayerful dialogue – not a rosy and pious one, but one marked by

honest heart-felt dialogue, in which the Prophet is being honest with God, in which he is getting fed-up, exasperated and even blunt with God. And in that honest dialogue God responds. So we might ask ourselves, when we pray, are we honest with God. Do we tell God exactly how we feel – or do we tell God what we think God wants us to say instead of what we want to say to God? Response to prayer only happens if our prayer is honest and heart-felt.

Let us turn to look at the Gospel, in which Jesus and his disciples are having a frank discussion. Their exchange occurs just after Jesus told his disciples that stumbling and falling along the journey of faith is bound to happen, but that it is not the falling down and getting up again, so much as the causing of others to fall that is the serious sin. Jesus has just said some harsh words: he speaks of putting a millstone around the necks of those who cause “little ones” to fall. In fact he says put the millstone around their necks and cast them out to sea! But he then adds “Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” It is to this extraordinary command for mercy that they exclaim, in today’s Gospel, “Increase our faith!”. Perhaps our faith needs increasing too. Many of us might respond “but justice demands that we do otherwise”. But our Lord is calling us to practice mercy.

In today’s Gospel he identifies that when we feel entitled, self-important, or proud, forgiveness is difficult to perform and faith is difficult to possess. Tom Wright wrote “It’s not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God. Faith is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God that your faith is looking out on. If it’s the creator God, the God active in Jesus and the Spirit, then the tiniest little peep-hole of a window will give you access to power like you never dreamed of.” And so Jesus speaks of how even the tiniest grain, a mustard seed of faith, will be enough. Because God’s grace will work with the smallest amounts of faith.

Some of us might feel that God owes us. We have come to Mass. We have contributed to the collection. We donate our time to a good cause. We help our fellow human beings. We care for the environment. We love our family. Surely... after doing all these things God owes us. But Jesus' story in the second part of the Gospel is not to approve of the master's behavior towards his slave, but he is using a concept that would be familiar with the disciples to show the proper attitude we should have towards our Creator God: everything, from our very existence to the eternal happiness promised us, is one huge gift from God. Man is always in debt to God; no matter what service he renders him he can never adequately repay the gifts God has given him. There is no sense in a creature adopting a proud attitude towards God. What Jesus teaches us here we see being put into practice by our Lady, who replied to God's messenger, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord"

So the proper attitude we need is grateful humility. The answer is that all genuine service to God is done from gratitude, not to earn anything at all. Saying 'We're not worth anything at all' doesn't mean that we lack a proper sense of self-worth and self-love. It just means that we must constantly remind ourselves of the great truth: we can never put God in our debt."

Speaking of debt, allow me to say a few words about what's been going on this last week with the Universities. This last week I have been busy listening to students. As you know things are a little tense at the moment and many of us hope that a resolution can be found. Apparently 77% of students want to go back to Wits tomorrow. I'm told that number is a little misleading as it's 77% of those who responded in a poll, 16,000 or so out of 36,000 students, which is not 50%, but it is sizeable and it is not nothing.

But what do today's readings say to them in their struggle. I would say that you need to keep the faith that this is possible, but that violence, and especially loss of life, can never further your cause. I would say that you are not alone, that many people agree with you about finding a way so that any academically deserving student can access education. But we need to come together to talk and this requires some patience. Not just students, but parents, tax-payers, govern-

ment and other leaders – what is being proposed is a major change, and this requires getting other people, apart from the students, to understand and this is only possible through some respectful listening. The right to protest does not include the right to intimidate other students, destroy property or use violence. It doesn't. Jesus started this church with 12 friends against a Roman Empire and he succeeded not by being stronger but by speaking the truth and enduring the suffering. Ultimately, the right argument will win. You can express your anger, articulate it, voice it, cry out on the streets, in the press and in the courts – but to harm other people is to give in to the oppression you oppose. And students don't need to do these things to get attention. You have our attention. And I know that “students committing violence” is a narrative that is being put on you and usually you are provoked – but in this moment you have to be greater. Remember, this is not a ‘South African struggle’ – students in many countries around the world are currently campaigning for a wholesale change in the way education is provided. I have heard this conversation in many other countries. The students here are part of a global movement to remove the millstone of debt and to make education available to all who can profit from it.

But I appeal to you that while you protest for what you want in the future, don't give up what you have in the present! And do not allow yourselves to be provoked by police and security guards that react only with strength. Your strength lies, not in shutting down the universities, but in having the faith and hope that others dare not possess. If your response is peaceful in the sight of violence, you will win many more people to your cause. The students can envision a world, a society, in which education is available to everyone. That is a future that perhaps is like the mulberry tree in the Gospel, massively proportioned. But you are showing us your faith that this is possible. My appeal is that you bring others on board, that we in this parish take the time to listen and learn from our students who can see a future better than the one we imagined; that we support them in their goal, and that we have faith that anything is possible with God's help. Let us all pray for an increase in our faith today.

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