

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

5 October 2025

"Challenging notions of faith and strength in Christianity: A sermon for Black History Sunday"

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Readings: 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17: 5-10

Gracious God,
we thank you for the gift of faith handed down through generations -
faith that has sustained your people.
As we gather this day,
rekindle in us the flame of your Spirit,
that we may remember with gratitude,
speak with courage,
and serve with humility—
faithful servants of Christ Jesus,
whose strength is made perfect in our weakness. **Amen.**

Introduction:

"Lord, increase our faith!" (repeat)

Our news headlines (and certainly some of the WhatsApp groups I am in) have been both challenging and interesting this past week. Our hearts broke at the news of the senseless attack at the synagogue in Manchester. An act we condemn in the highest degree and we pray that justice will indeed prevail. Then, the joyous news of Bishop Sarah Mullally's nomination as the next Archbishop of Canterbury on Friday, and appointment we warmly welcome and celebrate as the Cathedral as yet another glass ceiling is shattered in a nearly 1400 year old role in the Church.

But then, for those of us who are regular worshippers here at the Cathedral may have heard of failing health of our dear members- Rex and Norman, stalwarts of this Cathedral family and the sad news of our beloved Pauline, who sadly passed away on Thursday, for whose life and friendship we are forever thankful.

And all this besides the pressures of my own life, I found myself saying: "Lord, increase **my** faith!"

I wondered if our readings are inviting us not to stronger, accumulated, quantified faith, but to a different understanding of faith altogether.

Contextualizing the Word:

There is an ever-growing chorus within certain Christian circles lamenting what is perceived as the 'weakening' or 'feminizing' of faith. A perspective that calls for a muscular or “mucho” Christianity, a return to dominance-based theology where the language of certainty, authority, conquest and strength are common-place. Minimizing themes of vulnerability, servanthood, and radical hospitality because they are perceived as weak. But does such a theology truly reflect the Christ who came not to be served but to serve, who embodied power through self-giving love?

Paul's second letter to Timothy helps us explore this.

Writing from prison- a position of *apparent* weakness- Paul doesn't call for dominance but for endurance. '*For God did not give us a spirit of fear,*' he writes, '*but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*' Not power that needs to control others; it's the resilient power that remains faithful even in chains.

Preaching the Word:

October marks Black History Month and black theological traditions have long recognized the dangers of dominance-based theology, having experienced firsthand how such frameworks justified slavery, segregation, and ongoing forms of racial oppression not only in the United Kingdom, but across the world. Instead, thinkers from African-American Howard Thurman to South African Alan Boesak, have articulated a theology of resistance that finds strength in refusing to be defined by oppression and a resistance always searching for hope.

This isn't a weaker Christianity; it's one that has been tested in the belly and crucible of suffering and emerged with a more nuanced understanding of divine power- power revealed *not in might or power but in mercy*.

In 1967, when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the power of love in his “I decided to stick with love” speech, he was not advocating for a more domesticated kind of Christianity. MLK was calling for a Christianity that was *strong enough to love both enemy and friend*. The Black theological tradition that I honour is not about returning to a false construction of power as dominance and control. It's about a theology strong enough to suffer while refusing to hurt, victimize and ostracize others.

Jesus' response to the disciples' request for more faith has often been interpreted in ways that reinforce hierarchical thinking and spiritual insecurity. When Jesus responds and ends with the statement about being 'worthless slaves,' it seems to contradict his broader message of human dignity and divine love.

But what if we've misunderstood his tone and intent in this passage? What if, rather than reinforcing hierarchies, Jesus is using irony to subvert them?

Consider the context: the disciples want more faith- as if faith were a spiritual currency they could accumulate to increase their status or power. Jesus first responds with the mustard seed metaphor, suggesting that authentic faith, however small it may be, carries within it extraordinary potential. Then he tells a story about masters and slaves that concludes with what sounds to modern ears like a harsh dismissal. But what if Jesus is deliberately using the language and logic of domination systems to expose their absurdity? What if he's saying: 'If you think the kingdom works like how you clearly think it works- *where people are valued based on what they produce and constantly need to prove their worth*- then you've completely misunderstood what I've been teaching you.'

This reading of the passage aligns better with Jesus' consistent pattern of turning conventional wisdom and systems upside down. The disciples want instructions for becoming spiritual masters; Jesus reminds them they are called to be servants. They want to accumulate faith-power; Jesus points them toward faithful presence. In our current context, this teaching challenges both prosperity gospel approaches that measure faith by visible success and progressive tendencies to measure faith by the visibility of our justice work. Instead, Jesus points toward a faith that simply shows up and serves, without requiring recognition or reward. This isn't a call to accept actual exploitation, but to recognize that in God's economy, we don't serve to earn status or secure salvation- we serve because that's what love naturally does.

Living the Word:

Our culture often portrays faith as something we manufacture- a spiritual achievement earned through proper practice and works. But both our scriptures this morning present a radically different understanding. Timothy is reminded by Paul of the faith that 'lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and now lives in him.'

Paul presents faith as an inheritance; *a gift* passed down through relationships and community. Similarly, when the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, his response suggests they're misunderstanding what faith is. The mustard seed metaphor implies that *faith isn't measured by quantity but by authenticity*. When we receive it, it is a gift to be stewarded. We have faith, and we have enough of it to be faithful to God and the world, *just as it is, in this moment, in this place*, with these particular challenges. In the moment when I feel overwhelmed by the racial and economic injustice in our country, when I despair over the climate crisis and what needs to happen to avoid the worst effects, when I see the expanse of what needs to be done in these particular challenges, I believe this reframing transforms how we approach the challenges we face and experience today. I have no business coming to God and saying, "Lord, increase our faith."

God always gives us enough faith to be faithful right where we are, with what we have, in this place.

When confronting seemingly insurmountable challenges- whether personal suffering, systemic or structural injustice, or ecological crisis- we often feel our faith is inadequate. We cry out, '*Lord, increase our faith,*' because we feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of what we face. But Jesus' teaching suggests a different approach. The issue isn't having enough faith; it's recognizing and trusting the faith we've been given and handed down. This understanding of faith as gift rather than achievement has been central to the Black Christian experience.

My enslaved African ancestors taken from Sierre Leonne to the refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope did not have the luxury of waiting until they had enough faith before resisting dehumanization. They recognized that even faith as small as a mustard seed- faith passed through whispered stories, encoded in spiritual songs, embodied in secret gatherings- was sufficient when rooted in divine faithfulness. As we continue to face the complex challenges of our time: from racial reckoning to climate crisis, we need not wait until we feel spiritually adequate. The faith we have- however small it seems- is exactly what's needed, not because of its impressive size, but because of the God in whom that faith is placed.

What does faith say in the face of the shooting in Manchester? And I have no easy answer, but what I do have is a memory.

One of my earliest memories of my paternal grandmother is of her standing in her kitchen, cooking soup for all the children in the street where she lived: *“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus.”* A song I believe does not deny the reality of trouble but places it within the context of divine compassion.

The tradition of lament in Black worship similarly creates space to express genuine grief and even anger while maintaining community and hope. As we hold the Jewish community in Manchester (and indeed all places and people experiencing war and conflict) in prayer, we draw on this tradition of resilient faith-

❖ *faith honest enough to acknowledge the full horror of what has happened,*
❖ *compassionate enough to weep with those who weep,*
❖ *and hopeful enough to continue working to build a kinder, gentler, more Christ childlike sort of world.*

We plant our mustard seeds of lament, of solidarity, of action for change, trusting that even small acts of faithfulness matter in a world often overwhelmed by violence and despair.

I was particularly encouraged while watching Bishop Sarah’s interview yesterday, on her thoughts on taking on the role of Archbishop of Canterbury. She said that her call has always been *“to follow Jesus Christ, to know him and to make him known, always seeking to live with compassion in the service of others.”*

The new Archbishop's task isn't to single-handedly solve the communion’s complex problems but, as she so profoundly reminds us, to faithfully plant seeds of gospel truth and serve without concern for status or recognition. This model of leadership is especially relevant for addressing racial justice within both church and society. The Anglican Communion's complex relationship with colonialism and racism requires leadership that neither defensively minimizes historical complicity nor becomes paralyzed by it. It requires the courage to acknowledge uncomfortable truths while pointing toward healing and reconciliation. Sarah’s effectiveness will depend not on charismatic authority or political savvy, but on the capacity to model the mustard seed faith and servant leadership that Jesus commends- faithfully planting seeds of justice and reconciliation without needing to control how they grow.

Conclusion:

We are called to guard the good treasure entrusted to us- the liberating gospel that declares every person bears God's image and that God's love is stronger than all the forces of death and division. As Paul encouraged Timothy, so we encourage one another: 'For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.' May this spirit guide us as we face our moment's challenges, plant our mustard seeds, and serve our still-suffering world. **Amen.**