



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 5 October 2025 by
the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

Increase our faith

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke chapter 17 continues from the story of Lazarus which we heard last week. Here, in today's gospel the 'apostles' ask for an increase in faith. For Luke, faith is an openness to God, and it's this which I would like to explore with you this morning.

Jesus tells us that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we could say to a mulberry tree, be uprooted and moved into the sea, and it would be. And that, if we are true to our faith, then we can say we are 'worthless slaves'.

I want to start at the end of our gospel here. If you are new to faith, then it may seem like an odd aspiration to want to become so filled with faith that you can call yourself a 'worthless slave'! But this is not about becoming a doormat. The word translated 'worthless' is the Greek *achreios*, which actually means 'without making a profit' or 'without being owed'. It means we don't expect deference, or to become profitable^{1,2}.

For the journey of faith means that we don't exalt ourselves. We'll see that later in Luke Chapter 17, when we come across the ten lepers, a story which ends with the Jesus saying to the lepers 'Your faith has saved you': for faith is what matters. The same goes for you and me. What matters is our faith. So today, in our gospel we hear the haunting words, 'Increase our faith'.³ What is this faith?

¹ Contrast the story of the Pharisee in 16.14. And note that in all Jesus' parables the slaves are the Pharisees.

² To understand the story we also have to note Mark 10 and Matthew 20 with the conversation about sitting in seats of power at the right hand and left hand of Jesus. These all take place at the same point in time.

³ Cyril of Alexandria Commentary on Luke 17.5 "They ask, 'Add faith to us.' They do not ask simply for faith, for perhaps you might imagine them to be without faith. They rather ask Christ for an addition to their faith and to be strengthened in faith. Faith partly depends on us and partly is the gift of divine grace. The beginning of faith depends on us and our maintaining confidence and faith in God with all our power. The confirmation and strength necessary for this comes from the divine grace."

If we look to Pauline writings we see that faith is the central principle of religion. For Paul there is a direct object *in Christ*⁴ which roots faith and trust into Jesus' very being⁵ and our participation in this. For faith, or trust, is the action of entrusting one's whole self to God, under the influence of the Holy Spirit working within our heart.

For some, the very notion of faith is too much. Feuerbach challenged faith by arguing that belief in God is a projection of human ideals and desires, reducing theology to anthropology. Nietzsche declared that "God is dead," seeing faith as a hindrance to human freedom and the flourishing of individual will. Freud viewed religious belief as an illusion rooted in psychological needs and childhood dependencies, offering comfort rather than truth.

But such views do not prevent the fact that Christian faith continues to grow, day by day and hour by hour. Did you know that the growth of Christianity is faster than the birth rate⁶? And that in the next 25 years the number of professing Christians is expected to grow beyond 3 billion worldwide. With 78% of the Global South likely to be Christian by the year 2050.

But not just globally, also for us personally, an understanding of faith, of what the seekers in our gospel reading desired, is important for each of us. In John Henry Newman's Sermon XIV, preached in 1841, he made the distinction between faith, wisdom and bigotry. In the Sermon, Newman stated that faith is a spontaneous exercise of reason. In contrast, wisdom is an orderly development of thought. And faith strives towards ultimate truth, even though it might only have slender evidence. In contrast to bigotry, faith is open to acknowledging ignorance and always seeks to learn. Where bigotry puts on a show of wisdom, faith is content to appear foolish.

This is important, to see that faith is a spontaneous exercise of reason. Or as Michael Ramsey said *'Faith is not irrational; it is supra-rational. It goes beyond reason, but never against it.'* The reason why Christianity is growing, is that people are discovering for themselves that faith is not about neat answers, but about journeying into the very mystery of God.

⁴ See *The Pauline Idea of Faith in Its Relation to Jewish and Hellenistic Religion*, WHP Hatch, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1917

⁵ This picks up a strong theme in the Church Fathers that God speaks to humanity through the Word, the Logos, incarnate in Christ. Compare with Aquinas In Summa Theologiae (II-II, q.1), Aquinas defines faith as: "Faith is the habit of the mind whereby eternal life is begun in us, making the intellect assent to what is not apparent."

⁶ 0.98% for Christian growth v 0.88% for birthrate.

At the end of our service today we will hear part of Langlais' *Hymns d'Actions de Grâces*. The *Te Deum* is the third section of his three paraphrases on Gregorian chants. The first section began by evoking the *alternatim* tradition, where chant and organ dialogue between the human and divine, suggesting the initial stirrings of tentative faith. The second section symbolises the Holy Spirit's presence in sustaining faith. And here in the *Te Deum*, the third section, which we hear today, Langlais returns the theme, in full majesty and shows the fullness of faith to us all.

For faith leads us beyond ourselves into the realm of the divine. Faith is properly seen as an exercise of reason that is a response to God, a response of love. As Hebrews 11 puts it, it is the 'substance' or 'assurance' of things hoped for – the foundation of future reality. It is through faith that we are able to cope with all that life throws at us, and to move through trials to a more meaningful life. Faith is not about blind belief: rather, in the New Testament faith presupposes intelligible revelation. Faith is where the evidence leads.

Faith is unpacked in the writings of CS Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* in Chapters 11 and 12. Here, Lewis argues that faith is a virtue because you have to hold fast when it's hard in the face of doubt. Furthermore, faith is both about human effort, and divine grace.⁷ For grace comes, not from our imaginations, but from beyond us. Faith isn't a fanciful dream, but a reasoned response to revelation.

We see this beautifully expressed in the writing of George MacDonald, who inspired CS Lewis' writings⁸. MacDonald's extraordinary book *Lileth*,⁹ which deals with faith and fantasy, has a passage where the narrator asks:

⁷ "Unless you teach your moods where they get off, you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion. Consequently, one must train the habit of faith. The first step is to recognize the fact that your moods change. The next is to make sure that if you have once accepted Christianity, then some of its main doctrines should be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day. That is why daily prayers and religious readings [that last two Sundays, right?] and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed. As a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument. Do not most people simply drift away?" CS Lewis *Mere Christianity*

⁸ Especially the character of Lileth inspired the White Witch of Narnia.

⁹ Lileth appears in Jewish Talmudic text, and later traditions such as the writings of Ben Sira. There is one reference to Lileth in Isaiah 34.14. She was depicted widely through art, including the works of Michaelangelo and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The first reference to her comes in the Epic of Gilgamesh from c 2000 B.C. She has recently been reclaimed by Jewish feminist writers as a model of a powerful independent woman. See for example, *Which Lileth? Feminist Writers Re-create the World's First Woman* 1998.

‘Could God himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?’

‘When then comes thy dream?’ answers Hope.

‘Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness.’

‘But whence first into thy dark self?’ rejoins Hope.

‘My brain was its mother, and the fever in my blood its father.’

‘Say rather’ suggests Hope, ‘thy brain was the violin whence it issues and the fever in thy blood the bow that drew it forth. But who made the violin? And who guided the bow across its strings?...Whence came the Fantasia? And whence the life that danced thereto?...’¹⁰

So friends, in faith, we don’t expect deference. Rather, today as we join the disciples and we pray for an increase in our faith, our trust in Jesus. With our faith we must be open to acknowledging ignorance and always seek to learn. Faith, even as small as a mustard seed, means that, through God, we can do great things. For never forget that faith is grounded in the reality of Jesus, in the source of all life. Amen.

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

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¹⁰ See also Job 38.4-11