

The Twenty Seventh Week in Ordinary Time
October 2, 2016

If ever there was a prayer that ranks right at the top along with the "Our Father", the prayer of the Apostles today comes very close to top of the list: *Increase our faith.*

I'm sure most of us from time to time have experienced doubts and anxieties about our faith. We're going along just fine but then all of a sudden we are overcome with worries and may even find ourselves asking questions like: *What if none of this is true? Maybe God doesn't exist? Is the Church just one elaborate scam to keep us quiet? If God really loves us why do terrible things happen? Will I go to hell because I don't fully believe in him?*

And worrying about these doubts never helps those who experience them; in fact it leads to even more uncertainty.

Very often a person will try to search for the faith and certainties of their childhood and then they lose hope because they can't find them. And that can be very painful.

Jesus said we must have the faith of a child. And that is certainly true and that simple form of faith must be the foundation in our spiritual journey that must never disappear regardless of how old we are. Sometimes, though, we can make the mistake of seeing childlike faith as static or unchanging and this often blocks real faith development.

But as we grow and mature into and through our adulthood we see more and more complexities and shades of gray in our world. And so our faith needs to mature without losing that childlike quality of trust. We begin to see that life as a disciple is all about choices and sometimes it's very hard to discern the right choice.

Those who struggle with their faith *want* to believe but find themselves doubting and they feel that God is far away. It's as if their anchor of faith that they held on to earlier in life has been lost.

There's no deliberate choice here. This isn't a rejection of God but it can create a state of anxiety.

And it's a condition that most dedicated followers of Christ will go through at some time or other. It's certainly something that even the great saints have experienced and described. It's as if God removes himself for a time, even a long time, and we feel deprived of hope and it can be experienced as a time of testing or loss.

The thing we need to hang onto is that these feelings and doubts are unwanted. We *want* to believe but find ourselves full of uncertainties. But if we can keep that *desire* to believe at the front of our minds it will help us through these difficulties. That's when the prayer, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief..." can be helpful.

The bottom line is that faith is not something that once achieved remains the same forever. This is because we believe in a person—God—and since all personal relationships are essentially dynamic so is our relationship with God. We experience something very similar to this in marriage and the other relationships in our life; there's always some movement and change.

Our relationship with God is no different; over time we experience adjustment and change. Sometimes God seems extraordinarily close and at other times further away. We use terms like *near* and *far* but what we're talking about is not that it's God who is near or far *but*

how we experience him. God is everywhere and indeed he's closer to us than we are to ourselves but he exists in an entirely different order from us.

Interestingly, most saints who have experienced this have often described these periods of difficulty as being extraordinarily fruitful. But we tend to only see the fruits in retrospect and at the time only experience the difficulty. Our trust in God is tested severely and we sometimes find ourselves on the verge of losing all hope.

So when we experience these difficult times we should remember that we're not alone. The Church is not a group of isolated followers of Jesus but a community of faith. And if at certain times our faith is very weak then the faith of the whole community of believers can sustain us.

We can think of ourselves as being carried along by the faith of the others. We are helped and supported spiritually by other members of the parish.

Today's Gospel can also be seen as a suggestion that when we're assailed by doubts we make the mistake of putting ourselves at the center of the picture when really that place belongs to God.

And that's what the story of the servant is about. The master doesn't prepare the meal for the servant. The servant prepares the meal for the master. The servant's job is to do his or her duty. We too shouldn't become over concerned about our faith or lack of it; we should just do what God has given us to do.

Remember St. Paul's definition of faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith is "Hoped for" because friendship with God is rooted so deep within us that we can't force it. Sometimes we must wait.

Faith is a "thing not seen" because it's nestled within the transcendent nature of our soul. How could it be seen? It simply has to emerge through time. But the *effects* of faith can clearly be seen in the way we live out our lives as disciples.

Finally, the faith that is being asked for is not to have a better knowledge of our catechism. What is being asked for is a much deeper and stronger trust and confidence that our God is near us, even when he seems so far away, that he will take care of his own.

And God takes care of us through the bread of the sacred word and the living bread of Eucharist that is always available to strengthen our faith. These are the means whereby our faith is stirred and fanned into the same flame that burned in the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. For that reason, we return again and again to Jesus' table, where we are fed, where our faith finds new life so that others may also see and believe.