

John Bunyan's path to faith was anything but easy. Indeed the whole question of faith really seems to have vexed him. One biographer describes part of his path. "How did you know you had faith? If faith did have outward signs John felt convinced of his lack of faith... On one of his walks he concluded that in order to have proof he must force God's hand. Only a miracle would prove his salvation was assured..." "If I just have faith I can make the ruts where the water is dry and the surrounding ground wet." It was a simple enough miracle, small enough for a man with faith the size of a mustard seed. If it worked it would prove once for all that John had his faith and was saved..." (Bunyan of Elstow p44)

Faith is a difficult topic because so often we misunderstand what faith is and its role in our lives. So often faith is seen as Mark Twain put it as "believing in what ain't so."

I wonder how you see your faith?

Let me put on this table three bags, here is a very small one, one a little bigger, and a one that is pretty big.

If you were to see your faith as one of these bags which one would you liken it to?

In the passage we have just read from Matt 9:18-34 we see a number of expressions of faith.

The passage begins with this "ruler" that is not a very short thin man but an important man, possibly some one involved in the synagogue. Anyway he came to Jesus and his request was pretty clear as we look at v18 "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." That is pretty amazing. There doesn't seem any doubt in the guy at all. His daughter was dead but he believed that Jesus could bring her back to life. That is big bag faith! Is your faith like that?

But then read on with me into vs 20&21 when while Jesus and his disciples were on the way to see this little girl a woman in the crowd who has had a haemorrhage for 12 years crept up behind him saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

There was, as far as she was concerned, to be no encounter with this Holy Man Jesus just some contact with his coat surely that would do the trick. In a sense trick was, it would seem, the optimum word. Her faith seems almost superstitious just a touch of his cloak. Here is small bag faith not really sure, quite hesitant and certainly not thought through and developed.

Moving on with the woman having been healed and the girl having been raised from the dead there was in vs27-31 this encounter with two blind men. They called out to him, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" They saw him as the Messiah and understood that the Messiah had a healing role, so they called out for mercy that is for healing. Not such a big thing as raising the dead not needing so much faith a bit more middle bag faith. Jesus asked them about their faith, v28, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied." Here is faith. They were blind and yet believed that Jesus could heal them.

We get something similar later on in v32 when some people brought a demon possessed man who was mute to Jesus for him to heal.

In these events we see real faith and we might say that the people involved had faith in different measure. We also see lack of faith don't we? Go back to v24. Jesus had got to the ruler's house and saw the professional mourners there and told them to go away adding "The girl is not dead but asleep". Their response was to laugh, to mock and pour scorn on this man who obviously didn't know what he was talking about. They made fun of this man who, as they saw it, was talking rubbish. Jesus' words found no resonance with these people. What he said didn't fit their understanding and experience and so they dismissed his words and him. Perhaps some of us here this morning are tempted to do the same. Perhaps we come regularly but we have no real faith in Jesus. We do not ask anything of him because we do not think he is able to do anything. Even though we come regularly we may see the whole thing as pointless. We may even now be saying to ourselves it is all rubbish. I hope this is not so but there may be some who as yet have no faith even as those mourners had no faith.

But even worse there were those who not only didn't have faith in Jesus but who saw what he was doing not as good but as evil and attributed what he was doing not to God but to the devil, v34, "the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."" This is not just no faith but anti-faith.

However let me take us back to these bags and to the faith revealed in the story and ask us three questions, what is faith, how is my faith and how can my faith grow?

### 1. What is faith?

As we have been seeing all these people had faith. The Bible tells us that we are saved by faith, have access to God by faith, that we are to live by faith, walk by faith and fight the good fight of faith. But what does it mean to have faith? Is it as Mark Twain suggested "believing in what ain't so"? Is it just shutting your eyes, clenching your fists and wishing something into being?

Is it all wishful thinking and pie in the sky?

As we look at these people and their faith what do we see? Well there was no "believing in what ain't so." Firstly these people came to Jesus. Then in different ways they expressed a belief in him, in his power to act on their behalf and his willingness to act on their behalf. In so doing they showed a certain amount of trust in Jesus. In response Jesus acted.

Faith has at its root the idea of trust and that faith is showing trust towards someone or something which enables that person or thing to function in response. The other day I came out of my house and jumped into one of our cars turned on the engine and was prepared to drive off. I had faith in the car I adopted an attitude of trust which would then enable the car to take me along the road. As it happened my faith was misplaced because the car had been standing for a few months and the back wheel had seized up! But I hope you can see what I mean. These blind men adopted an attitude of trust towards Jesus as they called out to him and that act of trust and faith allowed Jesus to act. So v29 Jesus said, "according to your faith will it be done to you". What Jesus meant was that since they had faith he could act. He acted in response to the cry of faith. However, we need to note that these blind men acted in faith in response to Jesus. Clearly as we see from when they called him "Son of David" they had some idea about who he was. They were responding to what they knew of him.

So here is the picture faith is a response to what we know and believe about Jesus which in turn enables him to act in our lives.

That is why we see faith reflected in different ways which we think of in terms of size, small faith or big faith or in terms of strength strong or weak faith but what ever the faith is focused in the same person, in Jesus and that is the important factor. All of these bags stand on the same table and it is the table which supports them big and small alike. These people came with different needs and with different attitudes but they all came to Jesus. What is important is not our faith, its size or strength but who our faith is in.

If you look at v22, “the woman was healed,” at v25 “he (that is Jesus) went in and took the girl by the hand and she got up,” v30 “and their sight was restored” and v33 “the demon was driven out”. In each situation Jesus made the difference and it was Jesus who did it. In a sense their faith was justified because Jesus was able to raise the dead, heal the sick, give sight to the blind and cast out demons. As we read these things so our faith is encouraged because we see who Jesus is and the extent of his power.

Xn Faith is focused clearly on Jesus because of who he is as God and of what he has done in the cross.

## **2. How is your faith?**

That is as you read the words of the ruler, of the woman or the blind men how do you react? Do you think to yourself I could never do that? I don’t have faith like them? As you look at the bags how do you react do you think my faith is that big or my faith is smaller than the smallest bag? In one sense, as we have been seeing, the size or strength of our faith doesn’t matter if it is faith in Jesus. The woman didn’t have faith like the ruler or even the blind men but Jesus healed her just as he healed the blind men.

Charles Price in his book ‘Stop trying to live for Jesus’ tells of his first journey by plane. He was somewhat nervous but nothing compared to the woman who sat next to him, who gripped the armrest so tight that her knuckles were white. She had never flown before and was very fearful. However, the other side of him was a businessman who, having sat down, took out his book and began to read oblivious to all that was going on around him.

As the plane prepared to take off the woman shrivelled up in fear, Charles was exhilarated but frightened while the businessman was completely relaxed.

“The three of us had different quantities of faith. The woman had only a mustard seed sized faith – just enough to be persuaded to make the journey. I had a potato sized faith – by no means sure all would go well but believing we would get to our destination in one piece. The man with his melon sized faith never thought of any possibility that we would not arrive. But the remarkable thing was this...we all arrived at our destination at the same time.”

So in one sense it didn’t matter about the size of their faith because they all had faith in the same thing the aeroplane.

However Charles Price goes on, “On the aircraft, although all three of us arrived at our destination at the same time, the man with the greater faith was more relaxed and able to enjoy the journey than the woman with the little faith or I with medium faith.”

So how is your faith? When the big issues of health or pressure at work or financial problems occur is it to Jesus you look in trust that he is able to help? Then the smaller things of just getting through the day or some problem for your child or grandchild at school is there faith enough to ask Jesus. Is there faith enough to trust him to work or will you sit and worry like the woman in the plane?

How is your faith?

## **3. How can my faith grow?**

As we look at it I’m sure most of us would love to have the kind of faith that would come to Jesus as that ruler did and ask him to raise the dead.

Having said that the size of faith is secondary to the person in whom we place our faith yet still Jesus encouraged his disciples to grow in faith – but how?

Can I suggest three things

a. reflect – looking back at things that have happened and seeing where God has answered prayer and where our faith has been active. I know I am bad at this. I am always onto the next thing. But every so often, usually when faced with a situation similar to one I have been through before I think back and, having seen God’s faithfulness then encourages me now. This is why it is good for us to hear answers to prayer that we may reflect upon God’s goodness and his work in our lives and so learn more and more to trust him.

b. remember – the promises of God. It is as we grow in our relationship with God through his word that we are encouraged to put our trust in Jesus. As we look at Jesus as we have been doing over the weeks we see something of who he is but then as we remember his promises so we grow in faith. When Jesus says “I am with you always” and we go into that difficult meeting or into the doctors surgery or make that journey we trust him to be with us and then later we reflect upon him having been with us and perhaps see points where that we very clear and so we grow in trust.

c. realign – we keep refocusing our lives on Jesus and away from the pull of the world around us. Many years ago now I used to spend summers working with some friends in Devon. Mostly I was hiring out motor and rowing boats for people to do a bit of sea fishing or just to ride along the coast. But occasionally I got to go on the big boat from Dawlish to Brixham. One day I was on the big boat and was told to steer it. “See that point,” my friend said. “Well just keep her nose pointed on that point.” Well that’s pretty easy. Only it wasn’t because I only had to look away for a moment or two and I’d find that the current or tide or something had moved me off line.

So it is in life we may be going along with Jesus and following him but it is easy to get pulled off line and find that actually our focus is elsewhere our faith is in other things. We need regularly to realign and say “Jesus be the centre”.

In this passage we see Jesus able to raise the dead, to heal and to drive out demons. We see one who is God and as such worth of our faith and trust.

Come, young and old from every land -

Men and women of the faith;

Come, those with full or empty hands -

Find the riches of His grace.

Over all the world, His people sing -

Shore to shore we hear them call

The Truth that cries through every age:

“Our God is all in all.

Our God is all in all and on that truth we put our faith.

