

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C):
Carrying the Dream Forward

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Reflections on **Habakkuk 1: 2-3; 2: 2-4; 2 Timothy 1: 6-8; Lk 17: 5-10**

How long, O God, how long? Do you ever pray that way? It's a cry from the heart that we all recognize, even if we don't say it out loud!

Habakkuk's words are passionate and raw—not politically or spiritually correct, perhaps, but very real. They express a sentiment that underlies all today's readings: *How can we remain faithful through today's mess and into an uncertain future?*

Habakkuk does receive an answer to his anguished plea:

*Write down this vision,
inscribe it legibly on tablets
so that a herald can easily read it . . .
If it is slow in coming, wait for it –
for it will come, without fail . . .
Those who steadfastly uphold justice
will live.*

Or, in an different translation,

The righteous shall live by faith.

It is the vision—the dream—that enables us to keep the faith. *Where there is no vision, as the proverb says, the people perish* (Prov. 29:18).

Jesus had a vision—a dream, which he called *the reign of God*. This was the message he preached, using words when necessary, but using even more the force of his example, *living* the reign of God, *being* the change that was needed. But that didn't keep his disciples from living in that place of tension between the unfulfilled dream of justice and the immediate reality of oppression. It did not prevent them from

getting tired and discouraged.

So, in today's gospel, they ask Jesus, *Increase our faith*. In other words, *we believe in your dream, but help our unbelief!*

I know I have spoken that prayer, even though I felt rather foolish, not knowing how to imagine that happening. After all, Jesus doesn't conjure up faith for us the way the Wizard of Oz provides brains, a heart, or courage to Dorothy's companions on the Yellow Brick Road; in truth, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion did not really receive those qualities at the wave of a wand, but through a long, slow process of companionship on the road—much as God, unseen, walks with us on our life journeys.

And so it was with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus's response, given on the long road between Galilee and Jerusalem, must have seemed like cold comfort. As reported by Luke, it was two-fold: that if they had even *a little faith* they could transplant trees into the ocean; and that they should view themselves as “unprofitable servants.” Both answers sound pretty deflating, don't they?

Yet, if we look at the context of that long, dusty road, I think we can begin to understand what Jesus was teaching. Along the way, Jesus give examples of people who are *inflated*, who are complacent, and who have no vision, no dream, besides their own comfort.

Last week, we heard about the rich man who was so wrapped up in himself that he failed to

notice the poor man who was slowly starving on his doorstep. Soon we'll hear about the Pharisee and the tax-collector in the temple. As you remember, the Pharisee praises himself before God, because he fasts twice a week and pays all his tithes. He thinks his work is all done, once he has performed his fasts and his prayers and paid his taxes.

So I think Jesus's mini-parable about "useless servants" is not so much a put-down, as a reminder not to be like the apparent models of success represented by the rich man and the Pharisee: the disciples of Jesus are to follow a more humble model: that of "servants," who quietly do their jobs without expecting any special credit or notice.

There is a lot in Jesus's words that sounds like reality, too! Those who share Jesus's dream of the reign of God put in long hours of labor, and when they think it's time to call it a day, they find that there is still work to be done! *How long, O God, how long?*

We remember that after a long day of teaching and healing, Jesus, too, would try to retire to Peter's house or to a secluded spot for some time alone, only to have the crowds seek him out with more requests. *How long, O God, how long?*

In the household of God (to use Luke's metaphor), we cannot rest, we cannot be complacent, while beggars are slowly starving outside our door, or in front of Von's, or on State Street, without shelter or medical attention. We cannot rest while there are women living in cars on our streets, and children who have no access to shelter, health care, and education.

The vision, the dream, always needs to be renewed and carried forward. Poor Habakkuk was foreseeing a national disaster. He received his vision just a few years before the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, leading to 50 years of exile in Babylon.

But after 50 years, even in Babylon, the vision was renewed. It was brought back to life most convincingly by the prophet we call Second Isaiah, who dreamed of God's return to Zion on a straight path through the desert, with every valley lifted up and every mountain laid low. Israel survived and returned from exile, a people renewed and changed by their experience.

Jesus preached and lived his dream of the reign of God around the year 30 AD. About 50 years later, Luke renewed and refreshed that dream in his gospel, *writing it legibly* on a scroll, if not on a tablet, so that it could be *carried forward* for a new generation. By this time, Christian communities had begun to realize that they could not depend on Jesus's imminent return. God's work on earth truly had to be their own.

In the churches founded by Paul, the same thing happened. Decades after Paul had left them, one of Paul's dedicated followers sought to pass on his master's vision. He reminded the community of Paul's shining example of faith, using the recognizable form of a Pauline letter. We heard a part of that message in today's second reading, from the letter to Timothy.

We ourselves have had some important 50-year anniversaries this year, with dreams to be recalled and *carried forward*. In August we remembered the March on Washington. I was particularly struck by the wise instincts of Mahalia Jackson, who was heard to call out to Martin Luther King to put aside his planned speech and "tell them about the dream, Martin." Martin's dream changed the hearts and minds of millions of Americans then, and still urges us to rededicate ourselves to the work he began.

And throughout this past year we have been celebrating the 50-year anniversary of Vatican II. Fifty years ago this past week the second session of that council began, focusing on the document

that became *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. This document opened up a new vision of the church, not as an institutional structure, but as the people of God. This vision that still needs to be *carried forward*.

As you may know, Pope Francis's council of eight cardinals had their first meeting just a few days ago, and they seem to be very serious about revisioning the structures that govern the church. We, the church at the grassroots, are keeping watch, praying, and discerning what *we* can do to carry forward the dream, to *be* the change that is needed.

We are all here, in this place tonight, because *we have a dream*: of a new church that leaves no Lazaruses begging outside the door, or “sinners” hiding in the shadowy corners of our places of worship; a church that welcomes everyone to the

table, and where women and men are called equally to service and leadership. We dream of a church that listens to all voices, ordained and lay, and celebrates the gifts of *all*, married and single, gay and straight. It is this dream that sustains us.

We know, as Martin Luther King said (paraphrasing Theodore Parker) that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Or, as Habakkuk says,

*[The vision] will come, without fail . . .
and those who steadfastly uphold justice
will live.*

So, as the letter to Timothy says, let us *fan into flame the gift of God* that we have received, *for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of sound judgment.*

Amen !