**Help my unbelief** 21/7/24dkm md pm

Read: Mark 9:14-29, Hebrews 11:1-12

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Psalms: 8, 66:14-20, 141:1-4, 134a

On a mountain, possibly Mt Hermon, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured. His clothes became brilliant, dazzling white, and his face shone like the sun. They also heard a voice from heaven say, ‘This is my beloved Son. Hear him’ (9:7). Coming down from the mountain after this brief ‘mountain-top’ experience’ was certainly a ‘coming down to earth’ experience for Peter, James, and John, and especially Jesus. Jesus found himself back in the midst of an unbelieving and perverse generation. From a place of prayer, he found himself back among men failing to pray. Jesus told them that with faith and prayer, ‘all things are possible to him who believes’ (9:23).

This account of Jesus casting the demon out of a convulsing boy follows that of his transfiguration in all three synoptic gospels. Mark’s account is twice as long, with more detail about the boy’s physical condition. Matthew gives more detail as to why the disciples could not cast out the demon.

**1. Fearful father**

At the foot of the mountain Jesus, Peter, James, and John re-joined the rest of the disciples. It was far from a quiet and peaceful reunion. There was no time for questions about what happened on the mountain- the three were sworn to silence anyway. A jostling crowd surrounded the disciples as scribes argued with them (9:14). The disciples were unable to heal an epileptic boy, and the religious teachers were gloating at their failure to heal in the name of Jesus. When the crowd saw Jesus, they came running, probably hoping that he would defuse the situation. Jesus asked the scribes what they were arguing about but got no answer because a father came running to Jesus with his sick son. The scribes were wary of arguing with Jesus by this time anyway; their moment of fun in mocking the disciples was over.

The father of a demon-possessed boy made his way towards Jesus, towards the ‘Teacher’ as he called him. He described his son as being ‘moonstruck’ or a lunatic (Mat 17:15); his symptoms were similar to those of epilepsy. During a seizure he would be thrown to the ground, foaming at the mouth and convulsing violently (9:18, 20). The boy’s father had brought him to the disciples, but they were not able to ‘cast it out’. The symptoms of epilepsy were caused by an unclean spirit or demon. The boy was also deaf and dumb (9:25). In desperation, the father came running to Jesus, knelt before him and pleaded, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son’ (Mat 17:15).

Have you seen anyone suffering an epileptic fit? It is distressing and can be dangerous. In India one of our trainees suddenly started convulsing. By the time I was called the others were lighting candles and burning incense to get rid of the demon in him- these boys were from a tribal background. I called a doctor, and the local evangelist also came. The tribal boy was not speaking in the third person like the Gadarene demonic (Mat 8:28f). The tribal boy was given some medicine and he calmed down. We were all praying for him, of course.

The boy whose father came to Jesus had the symptoms of epilepsy, but Luke the doctor writes of a spirit seizing him (Luke 9:39). We also read that he had a ‘mute spirit’ (9:17), and finally that Jesus cast a demon out of him and cured him (9:25, 17:18). With less medical knowledge epilepsy might be diagnosed as demon-possession. On the other hand, with less spiritual knowledge demon-possession may not even be considered. While we may not see demon-possession like this nowadays, we still see many young lives being destroyed. Let us not doubt that the devil is alive and just as powerful today. He is on the prowl. He is out to devour whoever he can. Moreover, we are just as powerless to resist the devil as this boy and his father were -unless we resist him in the power of Jesus; with faith and with prayer, as Jesus says.

It appears that the devil is having a lot of success these days. We see more young people self-harming and destroying their lives than ever before. We read the tragic facts almost daily. Why are people taking drugs like never before? ‘Vapes’ were recently banned but the ‘experts’ still want hard drugs legalised. Why do young people have no purpose in life? Who has the answers? One politician was brave enough to say it was because families are without fathers, and schools are without discipline. Children need fathers who rule the house well, fathers who teach the ten commandments and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Children, like all of us, need a rock to stand on, and that rock is Jesus Christ.

**2. Faith of a father**

The sick boy’s father came running with the crowd to Jesus. He knelt before Jesus telling him about his only son and pleading for his help. He told Jesus that his disciples could not cure him (9:18). Jesus told the father to bring his boy, but not before expressing exasperation at having to deal with ongoing unbelief in society; Jesus was by this time focused on the cross (8:31). His rebuke, ‘O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?’ (9:19), was not aimed specifically at the father, but at the disciples and all present. The father was lacking in faith, the disciples lacking in prayer, the scribes lacking in compassion or concern for a desperate father.

After his experience on the mountain, Jesus was again confronted by the reality of sin in this fallen world. He was, as one commentator writes, ‘Confronted by that helpless boy, by that helpless father and by that helpless age’. He was confronted with the insidious work of Satan, not only upon the sick boy but upon all humanity. On the mountain Jesus stood apart from humanity, but down the mountain he was back in this world; He was sent into this world to save us from sin and death, and the evil works of Satan. If only people would truly believe in Jesus, if only we would walk by faith. A life without faith in Jesus is a life of perversity (cf. Deut 32:20), a life of twisted and confused thinking.

‘How long shall I bear with you?’ (9:19); Jesus was eager to return to heaven but knew he had not yet completed the work he was sent to do. Are you, as a believer and follower of Jesus, eager to go to your heavenly home, to the place where Jesus now is? Do you find it difficult living with sinners (like yourself) in this fallen world? In Christ we are set free from the penalty and the power of sin, but not, as yet, from the presence of sin.

Jesus was never too busy or too focused on his own troubles to help a person in need. He told the desperate dad to bring his boy, and the dad did so. The boy was convulsed by the unclean spirit in the presence of Jesus (9:20). When Jesus asked how long he had been suffering in this way the father said, ‘From childhood’ (9:21). We are not told the age of the boy, but clearly this father loved his boy and was earnestly praying for healing. He had probably been to many doctors and/or exorcists. He was now in the presence of the Jesus, the Son of God.

But still his response to Jesus was, ‘If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us’ (9:22 NIV). ‘If you can do anything’ was not an expression of faith that Jesus looked for. The father believed Jesus to be a man of compassion but was not sure that he could heal his desperately sick son. We could contrast the leper saying to Jesus, ‘If you are willing, you can’ (1:40) with this father’s, ‘If you can, you will’. Jesus picked up on the father’s lack of faith, questioning him about this, ‘If you can?’, and then declaring, ‘All things are possible for him who believes’ (9:23 NIV).

This is not the first time we hear these words; the angel said to Mary, ‘With God nothing is impossible’ (Luke 1:37). Jesus said the same thing regarding the salvation of the rich (Mat 19:26) and spoke similar words to Martha as the stone was rolled away from the tomb of her dead brother (John 11:40). Do you have the faith to ask God for something impossible, and actually believe he can do it?

Faith is believing that God is all powerful and that he does what he says. This father must have known that Jesus had healed many people and cast demons out of people. But when it came to his own son he doubted. How often have you doubted when asking God for something? Doubt is the enemy of faith. We must ask God in faith, not doubting (James 1:6). Faith believes in the impossible because with God nothing is impossible.

Are you a person of little faith? Do you need more faith? This father confessed to Jesus, with tears, his lack of faith. He cried out, ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief’ (9:24). If you think he was confused and contradicting himself, I urge you to carefully and prayerfully think about his words, until you can say the same words from your heart: ‘Lord I believe. Help my unbelief’. Drawing near to God is the secret of faith. Faith is not increased by whipping ourselves into a frenzied state, as some teach.

Jesus saw the people running together to see the ‘sideshow’. Before they could gather around, Jesus commanded the demon and it came out of him, never to return (9:25). It cried out and convulsed the boy for the last time, leaving him seemingly lifeless on the ground (9:26). But Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him up, and gave him back to his father; the boy was completely healed (9:27, Luke 9:42). With compassion and power, with a decisive blow to the devil, the Son of God set this wretched boy free. Luke concludes, ‘All were astonished at the majesty of God’ (Luke 9:43). The father’s faint faith was rewarded by the compassionate and powerful Jesus. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus goes on to tell about faith the size of a mustard seed being rewarded.

**3. Faith and prayer**

When Jesus was alone indoors with his disciples, they asked him why they could not cast the demon out of this boy (9:28). Jesus had given them power to cast out demons when he sent them on a mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:1). They had cast out demons before but this time they failed. Why? Jesus told them that, ‘This kind can come out by nothing but prayer’ (9:29). Matthew has Jesus answering, ‘Because of your little faith’, before speaking of prayer and fasting (Mat 17:20).

The reason the disciples could not cure the boy was their lack of faith. We are not told the details, but maybe they were trying to cure the boy in their own strength. Maybe they had come to expect a form of words would ‘do the trick’. Maybe they were treating the authority Jesus gave them like a gift of magic, with the power operating through the words themselves. Such an attitude can be a temptation to people in any sort of ministry today. We get familiar with words, which is good, but not good if we forget the power behind the words, the power of God.

Another reason for their failure was a lack of prayer, persistent prayer (9:29). Much faith comes with much prayer. Faith cannot grow without prayer. Jesus was regular in prayer, and persistent in prayer. The disciples may have started off with prayer, but probably gave up when they were not getting any result. How easy it is to give up in prayer! Remember, the power comes from God, so we must keep on in prayer if we want to see our prayers answered, and we want to see the impossible. Faith and prayer is all it takes, but having faith and continuing in prayer are the most difficult things in the world. ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!’