

“SPIRITUAL BATTLES (Mark 32)”

Mark 9:14-29

Last time we looked at this story of Jesus' life as recorded by Mark, we considered Jesus' "transfiguration" – the glimpse three of his close friends were given of Jesus' glory, the glory we shall share when the Kingdom of God is eventually brought to fulfilment. It was a mind-blowing experience for those three, up there on the top of the mountain, and Peter, as we saw, wanted to capture the moment and remain there as long as he could. Alas, that was not to be. Jesus himself told them again on the way down the mountain that there was to be death – his death – and a good deal of suffering before the Kingdom could be fully realised. And as they reach the bottom of the mountain the ecstasy of the experience at the top evaporates as they confront the mess that is waiting for them there.

The other nine disciples are at the foot of the hill surrounded by a large crowd. There's an argument going on with "*the teachers of the law*", the guardians of the religious and legal tradition of the people. The crowd are milling around. And there's a rather angry man who has come to the disciples for help, only to discover that they seem incapable of doing what he asks. The help that he wants is healing for his son who is clearly epileptic, but the epilepsy is identified by the man, by Mark and by Jesus as having an demonic origin. Once again the forces of evil are to be confronted by Jesus. The demons which have taken up residence in the boy's body throw him to the ground, rob him of his powers of speech and cause him to have fits which lead to other accidents (v22). (I had a friend in London who suffered from epilepsy and he lost part of his hand when a fit caused him to fall into the fire in his home.) Frustrated by what he sees, Jesus is forced to take control of the situation and effect the healing that the boy needs. And in the way he records this episode, Mark once again brings out several contrasts between Jesus and the other characters in the story.

Firstly we see the contrast between the **awesome Jesus and the argumentative people**. Mark tells us that as soon as the people at the bottom of the mountain saw Jesus they rushed over to see him and were "*overwhelmed with wonder*". Why that should particularly be the case, we are left to speculate, and one possibility is that Jesus was still glowing with the glory of his transformation – a little like Moses when he came down from his encounter with God at Sinai – and was so radiant that he had to put a cloth over his head. Whatever the actual reason, the people were clearly in awe of him: his divine power was apparent to all. Yet his followers are engaged in what appears to be some kind of row with these religious leaders. Once again, Mark gives us no clue as to the reason for their argument, but he makes it clear that the people were far more interested in Jesus than in the squabbling of his followers. Maybe there's a lesson there for us as we so often get sucked into pointless debates over aspects of what we believe, rather than allowing the light of Jesus to shine in our lives.

Then there is the contrast between the **decisive Jesus and his disarrayed disciples**. The complaint of the father of the epileptic boy is that he has asked the disciples for help and they have been unable to sort out the situation. Their impotence in the face of the boy's illness has no doubt had some bearing on this argument. Maybe they are trying to defend themselves in the face of criticism from the religious leaders: maybe they are just ignoring the man and hoping he'll go away. Whatever the case, they are clearly not able to cope with the situation and don't seem to be addressing it any more. But Jesus steps in and takes control of the situation. He asks what's going on, sizes up the situation and acts decisively to sort it out. It is always better to trust Jesus to help us in difficult situations than to get sidetracked into discussions over why the situation occurred in the first place.

The third contrast is between the **exasperated Jesus and the exasperating disciples** (v19). Once Jesus discovers what's been going on he gives vent to his frustration. There may be a hint in his words (and in his tone of voice – although we can't tell that, of course) that he wishes his time on earth were up. But he sees what they're trying to do without, it appears, any great faith – and he despairs. All that he has told them taught them, shared with them seems to have made no difference. And now we have this little

outburst. I often wonder what Jesus would make of our behaviour, attitudes and activities today. Were he to arrive during an elders' meeting, a church meeting, a committee meeting as we discuss the issues that fill our agendas, would he be saying the same things to us? Do we exasperate Jesus as these first disciples did? I reckon it's a pretty safe bet that we do.

And finally we have the contrast between the **powerful Jesus and the doubtful people**. Once Jesus has sized up the situation he speaks and the matter is resolved. The forces of evil which are at work in the boy's body are rendered impotent and, defeated, leave the boy. The boy's father and the disciples are clearly struggling with the issue of faith. Jesus calls them an "*unbelieving generation*" and the father himself acknowledges his lack of faith. He believes in Jesus. He believes something can be done, but he's not sure he has enough faith to believe that it can be completely resolved. I don't think there's necessarily any reason to condemn him for that, though. And Jesus responds to the faith which he does have, rather than the faith which he doesn't have. We all believe in Jesus to a greater or lesser extent, but sometimes we find ourselves unable to exercise the faith that is needed to believe in his power in specific situations. As the father does here, though, we can ask for Jesus' help in that. In *1 Corinthians 12:9*, Paul writes about a specific spiritual gift of faith, which I take to refer to the extra faith we need to believe that God can work in particular situations. We may feel at the end of our tether, as this man did, and feel that, although we do have some faith in Jesus, our faith is too small to make a difference. Ask for his help at times like that and be assured that Jesus does respond to the faith we do have rather than berate us and punish us for the faith we don't have.

In the end, though, what we are left with is the problem of the disciples' apparent impotence. What is the problem here? Why couldn't the disciples deal with this situation? It's a question that is obviously troubling them, because as soon as they are away from the crowd and alone with Jesus again, they ask him "*Why couldn't we drive the demon out?*"

After all, these are the closest friends of Jesus. They have seen him do it on many occasions. They have heard his teaching. They have actually been given his authority to cast out demons – look back to *3:15* or *6:7*. In fact, they have been able to use this power in the past with a certain amount of success – again, look at *6:13*. It's a situation with which we may identify. Things are going wrong in our life or in the life of the church or whatever and we don't seem to be able to do anything about it – our "power" seems to have gone. We've seen Jesus at work in the past: things have happened at other times, in other places. So why can't we do it now?

Well, let me suggest that the reason here is **complacency**. It's always been a problem for the followers of Jesus and from this episode here, through the words that were spoken to the churches at Ephesus (*Revelation 2:4*), Sardis (*Revelation 3:1,2*) and Laodicea (*Revelation 3:17*), and up to the present day. We have a wonderful Saviour and Lord and he has done amazing things in our lives and in the lives of people around us – but we can easily get to the stage where we take it all for granted and just assume that Jesus will go on servicing our needs without too much acknowledgment or effort on our part. In this story there are three ways that this complacency is manifest.

1. **LACK OF FOCUS**

Jesus comes back down the mountain to discover a crisis: a man has come to ask for help and healing for his severely damaged son. There's a clearly defined task there and one in which the power of God can be powerfully demonstrated. But what does he find the disciples doing? Arguing. Now, as I say, there's no clue here as to what the argument is about, but whatever it's about, it's certainly not helping the boy, nor is it giving any kind of reassurance to the father. The disciples have got sidetracked into some kind of pointless debate (I assume it's pointless, or Mark would surely have given us more details) and taken their eyes of the job in hand.

But isn't that the way the church so often seems to operate? Here we are with a clearly defined mandate from Jesus to share the good news of the Kingdom of God with all men and women, to offer glimpses of a restored, renewed, reconciled creation by the way we live and speak, to concentrate our efforts on proclaiming the amazing message of Jesus – and we spend so much of our time wittering on about the little things that really do not matter. Rather than claiming the power of Jesus to heal, we debate the principles behind it. Rather than making it clear that “*all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory*”, we spend time deciding whether this or that is actually a sin. Rather than proclaiming that Jesus' death on the cross of Golgotha has made possible the salvation of all humanity, we worry about whether we might be being a bit too arrogant in saying it at all. Rather than sharing the word of God from the Bible, we argue over what translation we should use. Rather than demonstrating the love of Jesus by showing hospitality and love, we argue over what colour cups are the best to use in our hospitality. We have taken our eyes off the task Jesus has given us and we need to refocus on what is his will for us.

2. LACK OF FAITH IN THE SOURCE OF POWER

Now, we've already said that the disciples had been given power and authority by Jesus himself to be used in just such situations as these. And they had successfully exercised that power in their mission around the villages in the Galilee area. No doubt they were then buoyed up by the novelty of their task and by their enthusiasm to get on and make a difference in people's lives. But, judging by the little outburst of Jesus in v19 and Mark's inclusion of the father's plea in v24, I reckon they had begun to lose faith in it all. This may have been a particularly difficult case and when things didn't immediately go as they expected they started to doubt whether it really was effective. And there may even have been a sense in which they had begun to forget that the power was ultimately from Jesus, it wasn't anything they could do in their own strength.

Again, it's a lesson we need to take to heart. We have, indeed, been given power from God through Jesus and his Holy Spirit, power that we can use to help extend the boundaries of the Kingdom of God and confront the forces of evil which are as rampant now in our world as they were in the time of Jesus (although we have now found other ways of describing – and dismissing – them). But we cannot take that power for granted and slip back into thinking it's all easy. Nor can we begin to assume that it's somehow something to do with us, rather than with Jesus. We have no power or ability of our own when it comes to fighting these spiritual battles. Which leads us on to the last – and most important thing.

3. LACK OF PRAYER

The one thing that Jesus himself identifies here as responsible for the difficulty the disciples have experienced is lack of prayer. (Some versions of the Bible add the words “*and fasting*” to v19, but it doesn't appear in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts. Quite handy, really, as we tend to link prayer with breakfast, if anything, these days, and spiritual discipline is by no means a fashionable concept for most of us, it appears.) The disciples had not been praying often enough or fervently enough, it appears. But what does Jesus actually mean? Should the disciples have prayed longer over the boy? Should they have used a particular form of prayer? Should more of them have prayed? Possibly – and again, we cannot be sure exactly what Jesus means here, but let me once again make a suggestion. It's a suggestion based on Jesus' own habits and on what we read in other parts of the New Testament, especially in the letters of St Paul.

I believe that the disciples were not prepared for this particular spiritual battle with the demons. I don't mean that they didn't see it coming (they couldn't foresee every eventuality, after all), but that they were not so immersed in prayer that their strength was kept up for whatever might befall them. They needed to keep praying and keep focussing on Jesus and his power in the same way that, for example a soldier is always undergoing training even though he might not be at war, or an athlete is always training even

though it's not the day before the Olympics. If the soldier or the athlete is constantly keeping their body, reflexes, attitudes and so on at the peak of condition, then they will be ready at a moment's notice to get stuck into real action.

So with the disciples of Jesus – and that includes you and me, folks! We are engaged in a spiritual war, doing battle with the forces of evil in all kinds of ways. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus that we are engaged in such a battle (*Ephesians 6:12*). It doesn't mean that we are dealing with demons or whatever every day. But it does mean that we are to be ready to engage in that struggle whenever it arises. We don't have an outreach event every week, we don't have church development projects happening continuously (although you might be forgiven for thinking so recently), we don't have to cope with serious crises in our personal lives every day. But we do need to be prepared for such things and the best way – the only way – is to keep praying.

We talk quite glibly about our “quiet times” or “daily devotions” on a personal level. But how much praying do we do – and do we do it each day? There was one of those slightly annoying slogans which did the rounds at one time, and like so many of those silly phrases there is a strong element of truth in it. It said “*Seven days without prayer makes one weak*”. The disciples found that was true on this occasion and their weakness actually left Jesus frustrated and angry. We need to keep at it, to keep asking God for his help, for his power, interceding with him for our community and our nation, acknowledging that all we have comes from him. You may not be used to praying regularly, so why not use the leaflet that was given you today as a guide to praying through this Advent season? Even if all you do is read to God the words on the guide for each day, you will be recognising the need to keep praying.

And let's not forget – although we do seem to forget with alarming regularity – that there is a corporate aspect to prayer as well. If we, as a church, want to know the equipping and the blessing of God, if we want to see the Holy Spirit move with real power among us here, then we should be getting together to pray on a regular basis. That happens in all kinds of ways here – a church prayer meeting on Tuesdays, prayer in house groups, prayer for specific areas of our life together – so, if you aren't already involved, give it a try. The danger is that prayer gets relegated to a spot way down our list of priorities and then when we reach a point where we really do need to pray together, we've got so much out of the habit, we're so complacent about the idea of Jesus just stepping in to help us as a last resort, that we find ourselves unable to summon up the faith or focus our attention and prayers on what's happening.

As we're now discovering in this dangerous book of Mark's, being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, is not an easy path to tread. We are identifying ourselves with Jesus in a way that makes us a target for attacks by the forces of evil. We are now engaged in a battle and we need to ensure that we are as well prepared as possible to deal with that – individually and corporately. There is absolutely no place for complacency in that and without regular, committed prayer, there really is no hope whatsoever of success.

Questions for discussion

1. Is Mark's description of the boy as possessed by an evil spirit due to his ignorance of modern scientific diagnosis, or do such things really exist? Is there such a thing as demonic possession today? If so, how do we recognise it and how should we deal with it?
2. To what extent do you think complacency is a characteristic of the Christian Church today? In what ways is it shown?
3. In what ways can we lose our focus as Christians? Where should our focus be? How can we ensure that we keep it there?
4. How can we ensure that our faith is kept “up to date”?

5. Why is prayer so vital to our Christian lives?
6. Is fasting still a helpful method of spiritual discipline? Share any experience of it that you might have had.