

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 50”

Matthew 17:14-23

Last week, you may recall, we looked at the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, the occasion when he shone with the glory of God and the voice of God was heard from heaven declaring that Jesus was his Son, that he was well pleased with him and that those who wanted to follow him should take care to listen to him. Alongside Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Law and the Prophets, symbols of the past and the future, between whom stood Jesus, the eternal present. And Peter wanted to freeze the moment by preserving it all in some booths. The words of Van Morrison’s song *Coney Island* were woven into the story – “*Wouldn’t it be great if it was like this all the time?*”.

And the point, of course, is that it can’t always be like that. We cannot live on the mountaintop, experiencing only the highs of life, basking constantly in the joys and pleasures of our relationships with God and with others. There may be those who would like to think that the victorious Christian life consists only in emotional and spiritual high points, but anyone with an ounce of sense – and with the most basic grasp of the Bible’s teaching – will know that, alas! it is simply not like that. Our experience as fallen, fallible, fragile human beings means that we spend plenty of time down in the foothills, if not always at the bottom of the deep valleys of frustration, fear and failure.

That’s exactly where Jesus, Peter, James and John end up after they’ve walked down from the mountain. They find the other disciples grappling with a situation of suffering and difficulty that seemingly will not go away. A man has come along with his son to ask for help. He clearly wants them to heal his son (v16), but they have proved singularly inept at dealing with the problem. The boy “*has seizures*”. He is an epileptic and the fits he has mean that he often ends up in places of danger – in the fire or in the river. I had a friend in London who suffered similarly and who lost some of the fingers of his hands when he fell against the gas fire in his flat during a fit.

But, as with so many difficulties in the time of the Jesus, the ancients saw a deeper cause than simply a neurological malfunction. The word that is translated here as “*having seizures*” is a Greek word that means “*moonstruck*”. If you read this story in the old *Authorised Version*, you’ll find the boy described as a “*lunatick*”, the literal English rendering of that word. This illness, they believed was brought on by the powers of the heavenly bodies. Jesus, too, sees a spiritual aspect to this disability – clearly there is some power that is trying to prevent this boy living life as he should – and he deals with it by rebuking a demon which has made this family’s life a misery (v18). Anything that prevents a person living in the Kingdom wholeness that Jesus has come to bring has an origin that is not of God. We must be careful not to make the leap from that to saying that anyone who is ill or who has a disability is demon-possessed,

however. God's good creation has been messed up in all kinds of ways by the influence of evil and a lot of that can be treated by medicine and other forms of therapy that don't involve exorcisms or similar.

In this context, though, Jesus recognises that there is something that needs sorting and he gets on and does it. The disciples have been unable to have any effect until Jesus and the three friends descend from the mountain – and that is despite the very clear authority which they have been given for such situations. Just look back a few chapters to the point at which Jesus sends them all out on their first mission trip in *10:1*. It doesn't seem to have worked, does it? And that raises all kinds of questions for us that we cannot hope to explore this morning, but you may like to have a look at in your homegroups this week. Clearly, not everything always works out in quite the way we hope it will, even if we think we are acting with the authority of Jesus. I don't know why – and I'd be interested to hear from anyone who has a watertight answer as to why people don't get healed as and when we want them to.

And the disciples clearly didn't know why. Once the man and his newly healed son have left the scene, the disciples come and have a word with Jesus. It must have been quite humbling for them, as well as frustrating. My Dad was a great carpenter and handyman. He'd served his apprenticeship as a joiner and he did some amazing work round our house, as well as making us the most wonderful wooden toys for Christmas. When I was about seven he bought me a carpentry set for my birthday and clearly expected his son to follow in his carefully crafted footsteps. But I was useless at it all. I'd try and make something or mend something and it would go horribly wrong, and eventually Dad would come along and with a few deft strokes it would all be sorted out. I'd be left thinking or saying, as these disciples did, "*Why couldn't I do that?*". The answer was usually something to do with the way I held the saw or wielded the chisel, but I knew deep down that Dad just wanted to say, "Because you're a clumsy git!"

Jesus identifies the problem as the disciples bubble with frustration. And it is an answer that has, sadly, caused all kinds of pastoral problems for the rest of us down through the centuries. Why couldn't they accomplish the healing as the father wanted and as they expected? "*Because you have so little faith.*" And ever since that time, when people have prayed for healing or expected some kind of miracle and it hasn't worked, the good old victorious Christians who look on have felt able to say, "Well, it's obviously because you haven't got enough faith." Now simply experience and observation will tell you that the way people are healed or not seems to have very little to do with the faith that's been expressed, either by the person with the problem or the person who's brought them along or the person who's been doing the praying. Does that mean Jesus is wrong here? Or does it mean that faith is something we don't really understand? Or does it mean that we've got a whole lot of really rubbish Christians in our churches? Let me level with you and say that my ability to explain all this is a bit like my skill at carpentry. I'm not

sure I have any real answers, but we can explore one possible avenue of thought together this morning – and, as I’ve said, you can pick it up again in your homegroups this week.

Jesus identifies the problem as poverty of faith. That’s quite explicit in our English versions of v20. But it’s clearly not the size of their faith (if you can say faith has a size) that counts. After all, the image he uses here – which he has already used to make a similar point in 13:31 – is that of a mustard seed, chosen specifically because it is so small. And even a very small amount of faith can have an effect. The disciples clearly do have faith, or they wouldn’t have tried to heal the boy and then been so disappointed when they apparently failed. Matthew uses a very unusual word here, which we translate “*little faith*”. It’s not the usual word, *apistos*, which really means “no faith”, but the word *oligopistos*, which means “small faith”. (It’s where we get that word “oligarch” from, which means rule by a small number of people.) They’ve got the faith, small though it is.

And that small amount of faith should be enough to overcome the mightiest obstacle, according to what Jesus himself says here. Now, the biblical literalists need to prick up their ears here. No-one – not even Jesus – has actually moved a mountain into the sea. That is not what Jesus is advocating here. If it was, there would be small sects of fundamentalist Christians in the USA constantly rearranging the Rockies. “Moving mountains” was as proverbial in the ancient world as it is to us today. To move a mountain into the sea was a way of saying in both Hebrew and Greek that huge problems could be overcome.

What I think lies behind what Jesus is saying here – and I’m not alone – is that even a small amount of faith can overcome the greatest problems, but it has to be faith in the right place – or, rather, person. The disciples had been given “*authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness*” and we know from what the other gospel writers tell us that they had actually exercised that faith. But they had done it under the authority of Jesus and with their faith firmly in God. I suspect that, from what Jesus goes on to say here, they had perhaps forgotten where their authority came from and had begun to believe in their own powers rather than God’s. They knew it could happen, alright, but they’d stopped relying on the God who made it possible. Dick France, in his comments on this passage, writes, “*Faith, for Jesus, is not a matter of intellectual assent, but of practical reliance on the living God.*”.

You see, we can get quite hung up on formulae and words, on the right actions and the right procedures. We can get very concerned with some of the outward expressions of our desire to heal or to change situations, but forget who is behind it all. Jesus gave the disciples his authority – they were to do things in his name – and we must never forget that. But even Jesus’ authority derives from the Father and that is where we are to locate our faith.

To help us in that, there is another resource which Jesus talks about here. If you've got your Bible open, you may well find that you don't have a *verse 21* here. I'm not sure if there's a little footnote at the bottom of the page that says it's not found in some of the earliest manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel, but there are all kinds of discussions that surround that verse. But I'm going to take it that that verse is there, that Jesus did say these words. He reminds the disciples of the vital importance of prayer – and, with the reference to fasting (which is even more hotly disputed), there is the suggestion that it is sustained prayer. After all, if the man had come up to the disciples with his son and asked for healing, only for the disciples to say that he'd have to come back on Wednesday as they'd already had breakfast today, he might have been a bit miffed!

What is behind all this, I believe, is that our faith – whether it's faith to continue believing in Jesus or faith move the proverbial mountain – is nurtured by ongoing prayer with God. We need to be constantly communicating with our Father – and if you find fasting helps you focus that, all well and good (fasting is another discussion we're not going to have this morning) – and we need to be ensuring that we deepen our relationship with him to the extent that we really can act with his authority. Keep praying, not just for the problems to go away or for situations to be transformed or for people to be healed, but keep talking to God to feed that faith in him, that reliance on him that can really make a difference.

Now, as I've said as we've gone along, we've made a few assumptions this morning, particularly about the attitude of the disciples. Matthew's account leaves out far too much for us to draw any real conclusions about all that. But Jesus' response to them does, I believe, articulate one main point here and Matthew has included this story and worded it in the way that he has to drive that point home. If we are to have any hope at all of making a difference for the Kingdom in our own lives and in the lives of those we meet on our frontline each day, then we need to rely fully on God. We need to have our faith securely and exclusively located in him. As with so many other things that are part of our lives as followers of Jesus the Kingly Messiah, that will grow and develop over time – our faith will become stronger and deeper and more effective. And that development will be nurtured by, will grow out of disciplined and faithful prayer.

When my Dad went off into the other room after having to put right yet another of my woodworking failures, he probably exclaimed "How long have I got to put up with that boy's ineptitude?" (except he didn't use words like ineptitude). Jesus said that to his disciples in a burst of frustration that showed he really was human: "*How long shall I put up with you?*" (v17). Despite the august company I'd be keeping if he did say that to me, I'd rather not hear him say it. I'd much rather take seriously the nurturing of my faith by prayer and ensure that that faith is totally reliant on and placed in God. If we all had a go at that, just think what mountains we could move!

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Jesus, Peter, James and John walk down from the mountain to find the other disciples grappling with a situation of suffering and difficulty that seemingly will not go away. A man has come along with his son to ask for help. He clearly wants them to heal his son (v16), but they have proved singularly inept at dealing with the problem. The boy *"has seizures"*. He is an epileptic and the fits he has mean that he often ends up in places of danger – in the fire or in the river. It was an illness, they believed, which was brought on by the powers of the heavenly bodies. Jesus, too, sees a spiritual aspect to this disability – clearly there is some power that is trying to prevent this boy living life as he should – and he deals with it by rebuking a demon which has made this family's life a misery (v18). Anything that prevents a person living in the Kingdom wholeness that Jesus has come to bring has an origin that is not of God.

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Jesus identifies the problem: *"Because you have so little faith."* But it's clearly not the size of their faith. Even a very small amount of faith can have an effect. The disciples clearly do have faith, or they wouldn't have tried to heal the boy and then been so disappointed when they apparently failed. They've got the faith, small though it is. Even a small amount of faith can overcome the greatest problems, but it has to be faith in the right place – or, rather, person. The disciples had been given *"authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness"* and we know from what the other gospel writers tell us that they had actually exercised that faith. But they had done it under the authority of Jesus and with their faith firmly in God. Maybe here they'd stopped relying on the God who made it possible. Jesus gave the disciples his authority – they were to do things in his name – and we must never forget that. But even Jesus' authority derives from the Father and that is where we are to locate our faith.

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Questions for discussion

1. Jesus heals the boy by rebuking a demon in him. To what extent do you think there are spiritual forces which affect our health? Should we just exorcise those who are ill? Why/Why not?
2. What part does faith play in healing? When people don't get better or when God seemingly doesn't answer prayer, is it because of a lack of faith? If so, who's lack of faith?
3. Can you share any examples of "moving mountains" by faith? (Your own experience or that of others.)
4. V21 may not be in your version of the Bible. How should we treat verses that we think may not have been in the original manuscript?
5. What do you think about fasting? Jesus seems to command it on more than one occasion, so why don't we all do it? (If you do fast, share your experiences.)
6. What are you going to do as a result of reading this passage?