

Scripture Reading for February 21 2021

Mark 9:14-29 (NIV)

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶ “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked. ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.” ¹⁹ “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” ²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. ²² “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” ²³ “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” ²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Sermon: “I Believe; Help My Unbelief!”

Last week I spoke about the Transfiguration, when Peter, James, and John got a glimpse of Jesus in glory on the top of the mountain.¹ Today’s reading relates what happens next, when they came back down the mountain.² This incident is often presented as an abrupt coming down-to-earth experience following a spiritual high point. It seems to me that there is a certain realism about that; too often we don’t get the opportunity to savor and celebrate the special moments because the messiness of reality quickly moves us onward to address the next crisis. I suggest that there are at least two ways of appreciating today’s story and both are important. The first is to explore the conversations between Jesus and the disciples and the father of the sick boy, together with the miracle account. And the second is to consider how Mark’s *readers* may have appreciated the story in their own context, since it was written during a time of war resulting in Jerusalem and the Temple being destroyed in A.D. 70. This is a

¹ Mark 9:2-10; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-View-From-Here.pdf> .

² Mark 9:14-29; see also Matt 17:14-20; Luke 9:37-43a. Only Mark records the extended conversation with the boy’s father.

message, then, for the wider church and not simply just for those in Jesus' day. And that being the case, let us be expectant as to what words of encouragement might be here for us today.

Jesus - along with Peter, James, and John - rejoined the other disciples, where they find an argument taking place between them and some Jewish religious leaders. They are thrilled to see Jesus,³ who naturally wants to know what the fuss is all about. We are then presented with an explanation by an unnamed father, who says: "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that makes him unable to speak. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they were *not* able to do so."⁴ First, Mark presents this story as one of exorcism, even though it sounds very much like epilepsy to us.⁵ A quick comment about that: We must *not* see epilepsy or other similar conditions as demon possession today. That would be major mistake! Mark has Jesus' *first* miracle as one of exorcism⁶ and this is the last major miracle of Jesus as he now journeys towards Jerusalem, so wrapping up this phase of his ministry.⁷ More importantly, the key point about exorcism is that it signifies Jesus' power *over* cosmic evil, which is personified as "Satan" in the New Testament. With the coming of Jesus, God's kingdom is breaking in⁸ and it is Messiah Jesus who rescues humanity from the *dominion* of evil powers, in all their forms - and epilepsy is vividly a power that *takes control* of a person. Mark is stressing that Jesus is a *liberator* and exorcism is one form of freedom that Jesus brings, two others being forgiveness and healing.⁹ Even so, the focus of this story is *not* on the exorcism itself, despite its dramatic description, but about faith and prayer – as we will see later. Second, the disciples are *unable* to heal the boy.¹⁰ Note that this shows us that they were very "hands-on" in the ministry of Jesus; in fact, we are told that the disciples *did* cast out demons in the authority of Jesus on an earlier occasion.¹¹ So why can't they do so in this case? We will come back to that later too.

The man brings his son to Jesus, and the son immediately has a seizure that throws him to the ground. Mark implies that that the demon recognizes the authority of Jesus and takes control of the helpless boy.¹² Mark, uniquely amongst the gospel writers, relays the conversation between Jesus and the boy's

³ Mark offers no explanation as to why the crowds are awestruck at seeing Jesus. Some have suggested that Jesus' face was "glowing" in a similar way that Moses had after his own encounter with God (Exod 34:29). But that is pure speculation!

⁴ Mark 9:17-18 (NET, adapted).

⁵ See also Matt 17:15. We must not be *distracted* by attempts of a 21st century diagnosis from the text!

⁶ See Mark 1:21-28. *Confronting* evil (in all its forms) is, then, a mark of Jesus' ministry.

⁷ There is one more, the healing of "blind" Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52), which arguably serves a different literary function.

⁸ See Mark 1:15.

⁹ See Mark 2:1-12; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Whole-Bodied-Salvation.pdf> .

¹⁰ Mark seems to present a prickly Jesus, standing here like an angry prophet of old, who berates his disciples for not being able to help the boy! He says, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? (Mark 9:19; see also Deut 32:5, 20). This sounds like *divine* frustration . . .

¹¹ Mark 6:7-13.

¹² See Mark 9:20.

father.¹³ On the face of it, this seems peculiar, in that the while the conversation was happening the poor boy was having convulsions on the ground!¹⁴ I suggest that Jesus is *not* lacking urgency or compassion here, rather the story of events has been adapted by Mark because has *another* important point to add. The trouble is we can't be sure what that point was because we don't know the *tone* of this brief conversation.¹⁵

The father had obviously brought his son to Jesus because he had heard of his reputation as a healer. How disappointed and confused he must have been when his disciples could not heal the boy. In that light, it makes sense that the father said to Jesus, "*If YOU are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.*"¹⁶ Was this said in hope, or in doubt, or in a willingness to try anything? Obviously, we don't know. Jesus responds somewhat incredulously, "*If you are able!*" With divine indignation Jesus rejects the inquiry as a silly question – the one who embodies God's power on earth *is* able! Jesus goes on to say, "*All things can be done for the one who believes.*"¹⁷ When we hear this, we focus on the "belief" part and immediately wonder if we have "enough" faith. We tend to feel inadequate and whatever faith we may have seems to run through our fingers. But it is not *faith* itself that can accomplish anything, but *God*.¹⁸ Even so, we have misunderstood the text here because "believes" is a verb, *not* a noun. Read in a different way, *who* is "The one who believes" in this context?¹⁹ It is Jesus! All things are possible *for the Son of God*, who himself *believes or trusts* in God the Father.²⁰ *Jesus is able* when others, including his disciples, are not.²¹ The text is *not*, then, about us – it points to Jesus!

What happens next? We are told, "Immediately the father of the boy cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"²² These *transparently honest* words of the father are powerful, and we can *all* relate to them. The words seem to be a mixture of despair and trust that so often seems to characterize *our* prayers when things are tough. Note that Jesus does *not* say to the father, "Well, you have to *try* harder!" As I mentioned a moment ago, faith is *not* a possession, and it is not something we can

¹³ This seems peculiar, in that the while the conversation is happening the poor boy is having convulsions and was foaming at the mouth. (Matthew and Luke have no 'delay' and the boy is healed.) This, then, seems to suggest Mark has another point to add.

¹⁴ Matthew and Luke have no 'delay' and the boy is healed; see: Matt 17:14-20; Luke 9:37-43a.

¹⁵ This is evident in the commentaries' various "takes" on this story. (See also Mark 11:22-24; such texts are pastorally and theologically problematic! They need a warning: "Handle with Care!")

¹⁶ Mark 9:22b. Perhaps the crowd, maybe even the disciples, wondered if Jesus can do anything to help in this situation.

¹⁷ Mark 9:23. Alternatively, "the one who *trusts*."

¹⁸ The story does *not* teach that one has enough faith, one can cure epilepsy!

¹⁹ The boy's faith is not mentioned! In fact, in no case of exorcism in Mark is the healing contingent of the faith of the person who is demon-possessed. (See also Mark 2:5; did the man who was paralysed have faith? See also [9].)

²⁰ This is said earlier in the context of *salvation* (Mark 10:27), and later, Jesus prays in Gethsemane and he acknowledges there at divine power is not the only factor (Mark 14:36).

²¹ Elsewhere I have written, "But *Jesus* had faith and responded graciously and compassionately in that situation; God was present. The father came to Jesus and was transparently honest with him. This act and attitude are *always* the right things to do. I can't help but wonder if the *quality* of the father's relationship with God, though important, had ultimately little to do with the final outcome. That, it seems to me, is a feature of *grace*." See, Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?*, 115.

²² Mark 9:24.

quantity, nor is it mere intellectual assent to doctrines or creeds. I suggest a better way to look at this is to say the father *trusts in Jesus*, while acknowledging his doubts.²³ However faltering that trust, Jesus can work with that and *together* transform situations that humanly seem hopeless. Jesus seeks to have faith *with* others and not merely *for* others. This comes back to that partnering with God theme that I spoke about a few weeks ago.²⁴ Jesus takes what damaged faith we have and God's *grace* supplies the rest.²⁵

In our story, Jesus then rebukes the spirit and the exorcism leaves the boy in a death-like state. Jesus then raises him up as if from the dead. In Mark's skillful retelling, the Greek words used foreshadow the death and resurrection of Jesus, which itself mirrors a conflict and victory over evil forces.

But there is more! And I suggest this next conversation between Jesus and his disciples is also intended for Mark's *readers*, and that includes us. Later the disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus replies, "This kind can come out only through prayer."²⁶ *What does that mean?* Jesus earlier had chastised the disciples for lacking faith,²⁷ now he instructs them that their failure was due to a lack of prayer. This is not really changing the topic, because faith and prayer are two sides of the same coin.²⁸ It is through prayer – simply speaking *with* God – that demonstrates our trust in him. Even so, what Jesus says raises lots of questions for us. The Lectionary avoids this passage, but it is only fair that we at least begin to address this complex today.

Now some people have suggested that Jesus' reference to "this kind . . ." refers to a specific kind of demon and that was difficult to exorcise. However, it *cannot* mean that while some demons can be cast out *without* prayer, this particular type can only be done *with* prayer! Neither is the contrast *between* Jesus, who appears to cast out this demon without prayer, *and* the disciples, who would have been successful if *only* they had remembered to pray. No, the instruction is *not* at the level of the technique, or a recipe, or the saying the correct words - as if they were a magical incantation. Instead, I suggest it is a teaching moment that is directed at the disciples and for Mark's *readers*, the wider church.

Even after the victory of God over evil powers at the resurrection, the commissioned church still finds itself confronted with such powers and is not always able to overcome them. In this situation, the disciples are reminded that despite their past successes, they cannot regard the power and authority

²³ Mark 9:24 could be translated, "I am *believing/trusting*, help my unbelief." The father trusts in the person and capabilities of Jesus. (This is vastly different from the father simply "*being willing to try anything*"!)

²⁴ See: <https://securerusercontent.com/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Partnering-with-God.pdf> .

²⁵ See also 2 Cor 12:9.

²⁶ Mark 9:28-29. Contrast this with the crowds of Luke 9:43. (See also Matt 17:20). Note: some good ancient manuscripts also have "and *fasting*." This is perhaps appropriate for Lent! However, this *may* be an early church addition stressing piety.

²⁷ See Mark 9:19 and [10].

²⁸ See also Mark 11:23-25.

given them as a kind of *possession*. Instead, they must continue to *depend* on the mysterious power of God that is available through prayer and trust.²⁹

Nevertheless, our prayers must *not* be telling God what to do! Listen again the prayer that Jesus later addressed to God in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, “*Abba*, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup [of suffering] away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”³⁰ The word “*Abba*” stresses that intimate relationship of *trust* Jesus had in God, and because he *did* trust God, his prayer was *not* one that *demand*ed God to act in a specific way. Our *attitude* when we pray is important, as much as *what* we say. In prayer we cease to focus on ourselves and consciously come to God *trusting* that he is the source of all power and all healing. Even so, and as we all know, when we pray, we can never guarantee a particular outcome. Every “prayer chain” veteran can tell you stories of those who died despite the prayers of hundreds of petitioners banging on God’s door for mercy. But that should *not* be interpreted as God being absent. Clearly, some discernment is needed! We are encouraged elsewhere to pray *persistently*.³¹ Yet if prayer is partnering with God, what is God “saying” when our collective persistent prayers (made in genuine faith) are not responded to in the way we would like? I suggest that the example of Jesus in Gethsemane teaches us that we are *to continue to trust in God*. That is also what Paul learnt when God did not respond to his prayer the way he would have liked. He recognised that God was still with him and God’s grace was sufficient for each day.³² Are we able to *trust* God like that? In other words, to continue to *trust* regardless of how God responds? I think that this attitude is also a feature of the father cry for help in today’s story, “I believe, help my unbelief.”

Finally, remember that Jesus said, “Bring the boy *to me*.” That today is an invitation to bring our needs to Jesus in prayer. If we don’t *even* pray, what does that say? By implication, it is an assertion that we do not need or trust in God.³³ In which case, we have no reason to expect God to respond - and nor can we grumble if he doesn’t! Yet this story brings hope as we navigate through the wilderness that life’s journey can sometimes be; it is a reminder that God graciously responds in surprising ways even when our trust in God is faltering. Let us therefore encourage each other in our trusting and let us pray. . . .

²⁹ In other words, they are *partnering* with God in ministry.

³⁰ Mark 14:36. This brief but complex prayer needs much more unpacking than I can do here! (See See, Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants*, chapter 8.) Even so, the theme of Jesus partnering with God resonates in this prayer too.

³¹ See Luke 18:1-8.

³² See 2 Cor 12:9. See also Rom 8:18-28.

³³ That is the epitome of the attitude that led to Jesus’ blunt response: “You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (Mark 9:19). See also 1 Pet 5:5-7, citing Prov 3:34.