

Prayers

To God

Reflect for a moment on the power of God to hold all things in existence, and His ability to love each part of His creation, including you. Let praise flow from your heart of thankfulness.

For myself

Reflect for a moment on the things that cause you concern and grief in this life, and submit them to Your Saviour. Open your heart to receive His perspective on all that is happening to you

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, bless those who work amongst children in our churches. Inspire them to provide a safe environment for the growth of those for whom they care, and encourage them by the vigour, originality, artistry and vision of children and young people. May everyone within the church accept children and young people in their midst as essential to Your great Kingdom, just as You did, and be enriched. **AMEN**

Meditation

Toe the line, and reap its rewards;
Things will ever be the same, just think about it.
But let the Spirit set you free, and be free indeed;
Things will never be the same, Halleluiah!

Where are you now, and where are you going?
If you care not that nothing changes, nothing ever will.
But God in His great wisdom sees a future for you
Far beyond the tedium of aimless existence!

Catch the vision, see the glorious light,
And let no lazy mind or tired spirit cloud your future.
Touch the very things of God He sets before you,
Placed in love to excite your yearning heart!

Take the first of many footsteps walking onward,
Cast aside life's fatal brake of sin and selfishness.
By Christ's passion all your previous fears are conquered.
God is waiting to be your partner in life's journey.

Bible Passage

Luke 9:43-50

⁴³ While everyone was amazed at all Jesus was doing, He said to His disciples,

⁴⁴ "Take these very words to heart: The Son of Man will be given up into human hands."

⁴⁵ But they did not understand this, for the meaning of what Jesus said was hidden from them. They could not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask Him about what He had said.

⁴⁶ An argument started among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But knowing what was in their hearts, Jesus took a young child, placed him by His side ⁴⁸ and said to them,

"Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the one who is least among all of you is the greatest."

⁴⁹ John spoke up,

"Master, we saw someone using Your name to cast out demons, and we told him to stop, because he does not follow You as we do."

⁵⁰ But Jesus replied,

"Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

Review

Our reading today breaks down into three short incidents. Firstly, Jesus warned the disciples about the pathway ahead for Him, but they could not come to terms with it (9:43-45). Secondly, Jesus responded to an argument between the disciples about their status, and explained memorably that in God's Kingdom their values would be turned upside down (9:46-48). Lastly, the disciple John sought some credit by trying to protect the integrity of Jesus' mission, but he was reminded that he had not yet understood the full extent of Christ's mission.

The teaching within this passage is now relatively clear to us, so our reaction must surely be to have some sympathy for the beleaguered disciples. In recent days they had experienced an emotional rollercoaster, and it should not surprise us to discover that they had not yet absorbed what Jesus said to them, nor had they understood how it would change their lives.

On the positive side, Jesus had trusted them with His mission (9:1f.), Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah (9:20), and three of them had seen Jesus transfigured in glory and heard God speak (9:28-35)! But as so often in life, these 'highs' were accompanied by 'lows'; in particular, Jesus had revealed His future death (9:22) and they had failed to minister deliverance to a boy in need (9:37-43). Any one of these events would have been significant, but as we may find from time to time, everything had come at once; the disciples were struggling to 'keep up' with Jesus.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jesus should now repeat His most important revelation, that He was going to die. He said '*the Son of Man will be given up to human hands*' (9:44), thereby emphasising what He said after Peter's confession (9:20). If we place ourselves for

a moment in the disciple's shoes, we will understand why they were confused. Just as they were beginning to believe in Jesus' divinity, He told them He would die a violent human death! How could this be? By confessing that Jesus was the Messiah they had given up their cultural beliefs about the Messiah being a warrior who would defeat Israel's enemies, but they just did not know how Jesus would go about doing God's work in the world. In truth, all they had to do was to trust Jesus, for without His death, He would not rise victorious! Thank God they persevered, for it was a hard journey for them to travel.

The next incident is one of the most powerful brief stories of the Gospels, and it has as much power to teach us today as it ever did. Tragically, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest; it was the first incidence of such a quarrel, but not the last (22:24f.). With Peter standing out in his confession of Christ and only three of the disciples experiencing the transfiguration, it is easy to see why the other disciples began to think about their place in God's hierarchy. Consider how important status is to people even now, whether inside or outside the church!

Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples as a stunning riposte to their presumptions of power and fame in the Kingdom of God, and this small but powerful deed triggers more than one major truth about God and His Kingdom. Precisely, Jesus said that the '*least*' in the eyes of the world is the '*greatest*' in the Kingdom, and this means that there is surely no status within God's Kingdom, certainly, not as we know it. But if we try to dig away at what Jesus might mean here it is hard to go further. What does it mean for a child to be the '*greatest*' in God's Kingdom? Perhaps it means that every individual, of even the least significance to other people, is of infinite value to the Father. Perhaps it means that in heaven, tables are indeed turned on the world's values. Perhaps Jesus requires us to put aside all our earthly presumptions if we are to enter His Kingdom. Perhaps all of these are a true reflection of what Jesus says here, and yet more than this.

There is of course one challenging feature of this we cannot ignore, which is the revelation of Jesus' love for children. More than this, it tells us that the Father loves children and welcomes them into the Kingdom (see also Luke 18:17, Matt 18:1-5). Over the centuries, it seems that some have flatly ignored this evidence of God's heart, and children have been treated as the underclass of the faithful, in need of training before they can be in church. What a parody! We are still confused about this, it seems!

Lastly, we read of one of John's rare contributions to the Gospel story (see also Luke 9:54). Apparently, others in first century Israel cast out demons, and John was concerned about this. He had come across people using Jesus' name in deliverance ministry (9:49), but who would have done this? After seeing Jesus do it, some of those who followed Him around may have wanted to get the same result without Jesus being present, so they used His 'name'. They believed this was an extension of Jesus' power, through His name. Now the only other people who did this were priests, or wandering self-proclaimed prophets, but they would have used their own authority and not Jesus' name.

It seems that John wanted to set down a marker between the close knit group of disciples who went with Jesus everywhere, and those who were following Him in the crowd, but Jesus would have none of it (9:50). Just as the child was of immense value in the Kingdom, so were those who followed Jesus in the crowd, seeking Gods' blessing as best they could. For Jesus, this was a distraction and His heart was set for Jerusalem, as we find out in the very next verse, which begins tomorrows study (9:51).

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V44 *'Take these very words to heart'*

Other translations:

'Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you' (NIV)

'Let these words sink into your ears' (NRSV)

The Greek sentence transliterates something like this; *'you must place into your ears these very words'*. Clearly, this is a colloquial way of telling the disciples to listen to something very important, and there are a number of ways of achieving the same effect in English, either by using the idea of ears (see NRSV) or by using a different saying to convey the same idea (see NIV). I have used the idea of taking something to heart, which, I believe, fits this passage well.

V47 *'young child'*

Other translations:

'little child' (NIV)

'a child' (ESV)

This is a small but important point; the Greek word used here refers to an infant, aged from birth to about 6 years. But the text says that the child was of an age to stand, so he was not a 'babe in arms'. Jesus' point can be affected by the mental picture we have of the child in this famous incident.

Further Comments

Jesus' prophetic words about His death

In nearly all the Gospels, we can find a difference between Jesus' early Galilean ministry and His latter ministry headed for Jerusalem. The first is characterised by teaching and healing and the occasional confrontation with the Pharisees (Matthew 8-12, Mark 1-7, Luke 3-8), and the second is characterised by Jesus' frequent warning about His coming death. The incident at Caesarea Phillip and the transfiguration stand between the two in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Although the Gospel of John presents a different scenario, which seems to concentrate right from the start on the last year of Jesus' ministry and His approach to Jerusalem (see John 2:13, 4:45 etc.), the other Gospels are clear enough. There was a time in Jesus' ministry when He became aware of His impending journey to Jerusalem and what it would mean, moreover, He was intent on talking to the disciples about it. It cannot have been easy. We read that Jesus spoke about this frequently, more than three times are recorded in each of Matthew, Mark and Luke (Matthew 16:21, 17:9,22, 20:17, Mark 8:30, 9:30, 10:32, Luke 9:21,43, 18:31), apart from other allusions to His death as in the miracles of the raising of Lazarus, for example (John 11).

So we can be certain that Jesus was nothing but clear about His destiny, even if the disciples could not understand it. The evidence from the Gospels is that despite the disciples' faithfulness, this was the one thing He said and did which they failed to get to grips with during His life. It was only afterwards that they were able to accept it. There was no other

way, perhaps, but the faithfulness of the disciples under such circumstances is nevertheless inspiring

'Knowing what was in their hearts' (9:47)

On a number of occasions within the Gospels, Jesus is reported as knowing something of what others are thinking (for example, when Jesus accused the Pharisees of thinking evil in their hearts – Matthew 9:4f. Luke 5:22). What was going on? Did Jesus have a supernatural ability to know the thoughts of others?

We must be careful. Although it may be tempting to think this, Scripture is clear that when Jesus was born as a man, He gave up His heavenly powers and abilities to become like a man, limited in all things like the people He came to save (John 5:19, 8:28, Philippians 2:7). Remember, when the woman touched the hem of Jesus coat, He did not spin around and look at her directly, He enquired '*who touched me?*' (Matt 9:20f.). Yet within this limitation, Jesus clearly exhibited what we may best think of not as supernatural excess, but a form of perfect human ability, that is, an aptitude to read situations, perceive people's thoughts, and more. All of us like to think we know what other people are thinking, and conversations often depend on assumptions about how people express themselves through both language and also non-verbal forms of communication. Jesus did this well.

One other thing is worth mentioning. You may say that Jesus knew some things by divine inspiration, and this is undoubtedly true, just as God gives special divine knowledge to people even today. But we should not extend our ideas about this to presume that Jesus could control all the situations around Him simply by the feat of knowing what everyone thought. He was, as He often said (as reported by John) entirely dependent upon the Father, just as we are. That is the miracle of His grace.

Welcoming

If we study the word 'welcome' in the Bible, we will find that it is a largely New Testament word. It is used first by Jesus when speaking about the missionary effort. Remember, He says of the missionaries, '*if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, then shake the dust off your feet ...*' (Matt 10:14, Mark 6:11, Luke 10:10). Next in the Gospels comes this passage of Scripture talking about God welcoming a child into the Kingdom of God, and there is little use of the word beyond this.

Then in the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Paul and John, the word is used quite powerfully. Paul says at the close of his letter to the Romans, '*welcome the person who is weak in faith ...*' (Romans 14:1f.), and '*welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you*' (Romans 15:7), and in his letter to the Philippians, '*welcome him in the Lord with all joy*' (Philippians 2:29). These and other passages reflect the church's use of the word 'welcome' as a way of expressing acceptance within the fellowship of believers. It seems that the early Christians accepted Jesus' use of the word in our passage today, and in some parts of the Christian church, acceptance into the fellowship of believers happens in a 'welcoming' service.

Unfortunately, I find no mention of the idea of 'welcoming' children, in a way that connects with this passage, either in the rest of Scripture or to the best of my knowledge in the practices of the major Western churches.

Discipleship

Application

Dealing with difficult things

It is fascinating to read in the Bible about the difficulties experienced by the disciples, because this should encourage us when we have our own difficulties. Even today, there are many who struggle with the idea that Jesus had to die for the salvation of the world, but they were not the first to have the difficulty! However, if we are diligent to read through more than just one or two stories of the New Testament, we will find that these same disciples were never stuck in their unbelief or their conceptual difficulties. They continued to follow Jesus with passion until in God's time, the Holy Spirit came on them and they were released from their problems to begin the life of service by which the church of God was born (Acts 2).

None of us can escape the challenges of faith, even if they take a little time to deal with. Moreover, the only route to salvation is through the death of Jesus Christ, and however we arrive at it, this is God's truth.

Arguments between Christians

We cannot escape the chastisement of God, which comes because within our churches, we often believe, or give the impression that we believe, that we are better than other Christians. It is such a hard thing to deal with, because we hold our beliefs dearly. However, our differences can all too easily replicate the arguments of the disciples about '*who is the greatest*'.

Whenever the leaders of churches gather whether in a town, or in our nations, or even when they (rarely) gather from across the world, it would behove them to remember that Jesus placed a child in the midst of His disciples and gave them a sharp lesson about '*who is greatest*', and no one came out on top! Or perhaps our churches have to back down from their pretensions before we can truly reflect God's Kingdom on this earth?

Jesus' teaching about children

We cannot escape the challenge of Jesus' teaching found here about children, for we treat them so very differently today. We see them as adults in the making and inadequate without training, education and skills, and when they surprise us with their grasp of the world and their vision of how things could be, we tend to put them down and stifle their creativity. Why are we so threatened? The Father accepts them as they are, without having to qualify their faith as immature, or set before them a deadening array of oppressive hurdles. When will we learn our lessons? When will we heal the world of education? When will we happily worship with our children in spirit and in truth? When will we rejoice in their place alongside us in God's Kingdom?

Who is for us? Who is against us?

Jesus appears to have a cavalier attitude towards this question; the important thing in God's eyes is that His work is done by those who truly follow Him. It would seem typical of people who are defensive about their roles and their place in the world and the church to be worried about who is doing what around them. Rather, Jesus encourages us to throw caution to the wind and trust Him who is truly in control of the growth of His Kingdom.

Ideas for what to do

- If you have children, what does this passage say to you about them, and their place in God's heart, whatever place they have in the church? If you do not have children, what do you think this passage says about their place within God's real life church? If you think some of this is important, speak to others about it and challenge the '*status quo*'!

- Explore some other passages of Scripture that describe deliverance ministry (Matthew 8:16, 10:1, Acts 8:7, 19:12f.), and pray about the meaning of these stories. Ask the Lord to show you more about this ministry so that you gain a better understanding of it.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do we really understand the death of Jesus on the Cross today? To what extent do we know more about it than the disciples at the time represented in Luke 9?
2. How can the church put into practice the godly principle of '*the one who is least among all of you is the greatest*'?
3. Who does deliverance ministry today, and what do people think of it? Why is it that we have such trouble with the subject, and what can be done to overcome this so that we deal with it properly?

Final Prayer

Father Almighty, there are so many things for us to learn on the pathway of Christian life, and Your Word has depths we can never fully plum. Guide us along our way, we pray, and teach us from the pages of Your Word, that we may be faithful disciples. Thank You for Your help, dear Lord, and we praise Your holy Name! **AMEN**
