

own initiative. Certainly, Jesus' arrival on the scene and the failure of the disciples to dispel the demon helped Mark to make the point that no-one can do anything without the power and authority of Jesus; in particular, in dealing with demons.

The disciples asked the question at the end; 'why were we unable to cast it out?' and Jesus gave His famous answer, 'this kind cannot be cast out except by prayer.' Ever since, Christians have debated whether Jesus' reply means that there are some kind of demons which need specialised prayer in order for them to be evicted; and in addition, some ancient manuscripts of Mark add the words 'and fasting' and it is by no means clear what the original may have been. It is therefore possible to argue extensively about what all this means, and end up asking quite ridiculous questions, such as, what kind of demon needs prayer for its deliverance and what does not! The best way to understand this comment about prayer is to recognize what prayer is. Prayer, for us, is communication with God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son, so what Jesus was saying to the disciples was this. Just as they needed Jesus to complete the deliverance of the boy, in the future when he had died, risen and ascended (the subject of his conversations with them all since Caesarea Philippi), they would have to talk with Him in prayer about such matters. I am not sure it is worth trying to make this passage say more than this.

Application

There are many things which we can take from this passage of Scripture. Firstly, as with the disciples in this story, it is all too easy for us now to become a barrier to other people's faith because we appear to be so much less able than the Saviour we proclaim. We can never do by ourselves all the things Jesus did, but we can expect that when we gather together with other Christians, we combine as the 'Body of Christ', and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be far more effective in our Christian witness together than we can be individually. In addition, the witness we give the world is dependent upon our contact with our Saviour. This means that we need to be in constant contact with our Lord through prayer, doing His will and demonstrating Him through all our words and deeds.

Secondly, the belief and unbelief of the father is a complete paradox; he clearly had doubts, but effectively confessed those doubts and recognised his own weaknesses before the Lord, and it was this that enabled Jesus to respond to him. Doubt and unbelief is certainly a part of the spiritual journey of many people, but it can never be more than a state of 'un-satisfaction' within which we come to know and want what we either do not have or have lost; our faith in God and Jesus Christ His Son. Faith is the key to the knowledge of our salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, but we should not look askance at those who struggle with unbelief, reaching out for Jesus and His Kingdom. Our privilege is to offer them help, without prejudice. Christians should only attack 'doubt' or unbelief where it is used as an excuse for not accepting faith, as if it were some kind of principle or justification for standing at a distance from God. Such a stance is in opposition to Christian faith, and rarely is it part of any path towards it.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What is your reaction to the phrase, 'I believe, help my unbelief!' What circumstances of your life does this reflect?
2. Discuss this story in your groups from the point of view of the father, the disciples and the crowd. In what ways do they all see this differently?
3. Why do Christian people fail to do the things Jesus did, today?

Discipleship

If you have an opportunity and are able, take time to have a long walk (or other time by yourself), and during this time, think back through your life and recall times when things have been different and you have perhaps doubted God's love for you. Offer such times to the Lord and ask Him for forgiveness. He does not turn away a repentant sinner. Having done this, offer the past into God's hands and pray about the future; see what the Lord will reveal!

Final Prayer

Forgive us, Lord, when we do not demonstrate the Kingdom of God through what we do and say. Give us grace to accept our failing and lift us above the mediocrity into which, too often, we settle. May we follow Your example in all things and demonstrate the faith You have planted within us; AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, may our lives radiate the wonder of Your presence, and may we be ready to accept anything You have called us to do. We long to see Your glory lived and demonstrated in this world, so make us, Your Church, into a people fit for this great purpose! Accordingly, renew us each day by the power of Your Holy Spirit! Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Elections

When elections take place, we assume that democracy is working. However, all countries have different ways of using votes to arrive at the results of elections, and the workings of democracy are often neither as transparent nor as understandable as we might think. Pray for the way in which elections are conducted in your country, and ask God to use them for good.

Meditation

(Reflection on the use of the tongue and speaking, from Proverbs 12:18,19; Isaiah 50:4; James 3:5f. etc.)

Do not speak unkindly;
The hearts to which you speak are far more tender than you think,
And what you wish to say will not be heard if all you say lays blame.

Do not speak too quickly,
The minds to which you speak will have their own agenda,
And courtesy will gain attention far more quickly than a roar.

Do not speak presumptively,
The souls to which you speak have trod a path you do not know,
And if you will not hear from them, they will not hear from you.

Speak with Christ-like honesty,
Learn from Him who knows all things, yet more than tolerates us,
Waiting on us, listening, taking in our words, engaging with our hearts
And offering in His listening ear, a love that knows no bounds.

Bible Study - Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴ When they had come back to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ The crowd saw Him straight away. They were astonished and ran towards Him to greet Him. ¹⁶ He asked them, 'What are you disputing with them?' ¹⁷ A man in the crowd replied to Him, 'Teacher, I brought my son to you because he has a dumb spirit; ¹⁸ and as soon as it takes hold of him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked these disciples of Yours to cast it out and they were unable to do so. ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, 'O unbelieving generation, how much longer will I be with you? How long do I have to put up with you? Bring him to me!' ²⁰ So they brought the boy to 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 father, 'How long has he been like this?' He answered, 'From childhood. ²² It has often thrown him into fire and into water so as to kill him; but if you can, have pity on us and help us!' ²³ But Jesus said to him, 'If you can?' All things are possible to those who believe! ²⁴ Straight away, the boy's father called out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' ²⁵ Jesus could see that the crowd was rapidly closing in, so He rebuked the evil spirit, saying, 'You deaf and dumb spirit; I command you, come out of him and never enter him again!' ²⁶ Then, after shouting out and throwing the boy into further convulsions, it came out, and the boy appeared like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸ When Jesus went indoors, His disciples asked Him privately; 'Why were we unable to cast it out?' ²⁹ He said to them, 'This kind cannot be cast out except by prayer.'

Review

Mark's story of the healing and deliverance of the young boy with a 'dumb spirit' (9:17) is one of the most powerful of healing and deliverance stories in the whole Gospel. That is not to belittle any of the other miracle stories, but to emphasise the significance of this story for the whole Gospel, placed immediately after the two crucial events at the centre of the Gospel; Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-30) and the Transfiguration of Jesus (9:1-13). These events indicated a change in the focus and direction of Jesus ministry; He no longer merely taught and performed miracles, He set Himself to His destiny, to suffer and die for the salvation of the world (8:31-38). Nothing would be the same again. Nevertheless, this story shows us vividly that human need remained unchanged, a faithless generation needed to be saved and that faith and the presence of Jesus Himself would continue to be the key to that salvation.

There is a great deal of debate about this story, because although it is both dramatic and wonderful, it is not easy to explain or understand. Many will notice that the symptoms of the boy are those of some kind of epilepsy, and they find it hard to believe that the appropriate way to deal with epilepsy might be to cast out a demon. In addition, Jesus' last comment about casting out such demons by prayer reads as if Jesus was talking about a 'technique' necessary for deliverance, but prayer is not used in this way in any other deliverance miracle in the Gospels.

Jesus came back from the Transfiguration talking with the three disciples who had been with Him (9:9-13). While they had been away on the mountain top, the other nine had been in an awkward situation. They had been approached by the father of a boy who had seizures, and the disciples had attempted to cast out a demon responsible according to the instructions given them for missions (6:7f.). However, they had been unsuccessful (9:18,28), and the scribes, who had been tracking Jesus' every move prior to His journey to Caesarea Philippi, pounced on their weakness.

We do not have a complete story of what happened, but what Mark tells us is that as Jesus arrived there was something of an argument between the disciples and the scribes (9:14). The disciples would have done their best to defend their master's reputation, but while He was away, the scribes held the upper hand! No wonder there was a surprised rush towards Jesus as soon as He appeared (9:15)! Even though their mistakes would soon be found out, the disciples needed their master, and the scribes were seeking to press home their advantage! The crowd eagerly awaited what would happen next!

In the midst of the ensuing mêlée, the father of the troubled boy had to shout to Jesus (9:17) to tell Him what was happening, drawing attention back to the root of the situation, the terrible suffering of a boy. When Jesus said, 'O unbelieving generation, how much longer will I be with you' (9:19), He may have said this to the disciples, the crowd or the scribes; or all three. It is unlikely that Jesus said this to the father, whom he sought to help, yet after the man had described to Jesus the appalling details of his son's condition (9:20-22), Jesus challenged him to believe. This was a tough call. The poor man had seen the disciples of this supposed 'Messiah' fail. However, in a moment of inspiration that has inspired millions of people ever since, he said; 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (9:24).

The incredible phrase spoken by the father encapsulates the truth of the human condition in a powerful way. Despite the paradox of his own situation, he reached out for what Jesus offered, aware of his own frailty and dependence. Jesus responded to this remarkable faith by ministering deliverance to the boy (9:25-27), and the reason why Jesus told the disciples that they needed 'prayer' for 'this kind' of deliverance was because only the presence of the Saviour (through prayer) could deal with such critical situations. Only through Jesus can such ministry be fulfilled.

Going Deeper

At every point of this story there are remarkable details to Mark's story which need further explanation. Was it epilepsy or a demon? Why did Jesus cast out a deaf and dumb spirit (9:25) instead of just a dumb spirit (9:17)? How does the message about faith connect with Jesus' words at the end about prayer? We must now explore all these.

Firstly, though, we should remember the story's significance due to its place in Mark's Gospel. The whole central section of the Gospel from the Caesarea Philippi incident (8:27-30) to the Transfiguration (8:27-9:13) is enclosed by two important stories of healing and deliverance. Beforehand is the healing of the blind man (8:22-26) which illustrates the power of Jesus to bring sight to the blind. In addition, though, this story illustrates the fact that the disciples could only begin to understand Jesus' ministry if He performed for them a spiritual version of the same miracle. Now after this section, with our reading today of the healing of the dumb boy, we

realise that this also illustrates what Jesus was doing for the disciples, because He had just opened their mouths when they had declared their faith in Jesus (8:27-30); albeit through Peter. Remember, the prophecy of Isaiah to which Mark alludes frequently is this, 'The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf be unstopped ... the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy' (Isaiah 35:5,6). Both healing miracles and the stories between go together to demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy.

Whilst this highlights the role of the disciples in this story, there are many layers to this complex story. If you read its companions in Matthew (17:14-21) and Luke (9:37-43), Mark's version is far more extensive, and contains extra critical details; especially the phrase, 'I believe, help my unbelief.' (9:24) as well as Jesus' comment about prayer at the end.

What happened to the father and the boy

Central to the story is what happened to the father and the boy. We have seen above how the father of the boy with a 'dumb spirit' had to call out to Jesus to tell him what was wrong with his son. Some feel that this story is like a mixture of one about a boy with a dumb spirit, and the healing of a boy with epilepsy; because that is what the symptoms portray (9:18). Certainly, a 'dumb spirit' (9:17) seems a strange way to describe these symptoms. However, what Mark tells us is important; the boy was dumb and had the seizure like effects described, and his father believed that this was caused by a 'dumb spirit'; moreover, Jesus accepted this. It is all too easy for people today to say, 'It was obviously epilepsy and not a demon' because people find it hard to believe in the demonic today, but we cannot dismiss what Jesus did by dealing with the situation and casting out the demon involved (9:25). There is no reason for us to assume that all people today who have seizure symptoms like those described here should be considered by Christians to have demons. For in each situation He faced, Jesus responded to the situation presented to Him and each individual case (as far as we can tell from studying all the Gospels) was different, and that should be our approach today.

The father was obviously going through all kinds of agony trying to help his son (9:22,24). It is interesting to note that in many previous instances in which Jesus met people who needed His help, they had confidence in His power to do what they asked of Him, but were not sure whether he was willing to act; for example, the leper said to Jesus, 'if you will, you can make me clean ...' (1:40). The man in today's reading had lost his confidence in Jesus because of the failures of His disciples, and this caused him to doubt Jesus' ability to do what he wanted, so he said, 'if you can, have pity on us' (9:22). Jesus immediately picked up the phrase with the doubt; 'if you can' and challenged the man. It was not a matter of Jesus' ability, but of belief.

One strange part of this story is the fact that the spirit is described as a 'dumb' spirit early in the story (9:17). At the end of it, Jesus spoke directly to the demon and said 'You deaf and dumb spirit ... come out of him ...' (9:25). Why the difference? There are two possible explanations. The first is that Mark was taken up with his theme from Isaiah 35:5 (see above) about not only the 'speechless' but also the deaf, and he added the word 'deaf' to reflect this. This may be a bit too cunning. The alternative and perhaps preferable interpretation is that the boy's father only saw part of his son's problem, which was his being unable to speak (this is what the Greek word for dumb means, quite obviously and literally). However, when Jesus came to deal with the demon, He saw more than the father saw, and addressed the demon using another word, which in Greek means either 'deaf' or 'dumb' and often both. It is difficult for us to understand from our scientific world view today, but the language of the ancients simply reflected what they empirically found, which was that the two were often related. Jesus may well have seen this in the boy, and proceeded to cast out the demon accordingly. The demon created great confusion, but had to be obedient to the higher authority of Jesus, and ultimately, and quickly, left the boy. Jesus then 'raised' him by the hand, though as the passage makes clear, what happened appeared to those present as something like recovery from death!

What happened to the disciples

We have already learned a great deal about the disciples from this incident. From a place of complete misunderstanding and 'hardness of heart' (8:17), their eyes had been opened and their mouths 'unstopped' (Isaiah 35:5,6), and although they had failed to cast out the demon, they were not rebuked by Jesus when He gathered them together at the end (9:28,29).

The truth of the situation was that the disciples were probably unwise to try and cast out the demon without Jesus being with them. They had received a commission earlier to do such things (6:7), but whilst Jesus was still alive they had to follow Him and not take action on their