

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 25th July 2021 – Andy Banks
Mark 9:14-29 – ‘Yes Jesus Can!’

We’re continuing our series in Mark’s Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Which has a follow up question, “What difference does who he is make to your life?” We read today from Mark 9:14-29.

[Read Mark 9:14-29]

14When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15As 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.

17A man in the crowd answered, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18Whenever 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.’

20So 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.

21Jesus 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.’

24Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

25When 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.’

26The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, ‘He’s dead.’ 27But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

28After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we drive it out?’

29He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer.’

[Pray]

It was a political slogan that captured the hearts of America and the world, and has since become part of our collective consciousness: “Yes, we can!” Barack Obama’s signature declaration was unusual in politics in being so positive a message. And I personally feel he was one of the best US presidents of my lifetime, though, of course, he did not achieve all that he *promised* to achieve, either through human failure because he was blocked from doing so by one or another parliamentary house.

Humans may promise, but in reality they cannot always *deliver* what they promise, even if their promises are sincere. And the disciples in our passage were in a similar situation. In Jesus’ absence, it seems they had promised to drive the demon out of this boy, as they had previously done with the authority Jesus gave them. But, on this occasion they had been unable to do so. And so, an argument had broken out between them, the Teachers of the Law, the boy’s father, and the crowd around them. We don’t know the exact content of the argument, but we can reasonably surmise that the Teachers of the Law were seeking to use this failure to challenge the legitimacy of Jesus’ own ministry and the validity of the disciples in following him.

For Peter, James and John, perhaps even for Jesus, it must have been quite a come down from the incredible high of the transfiguration to return to such an argument. And that is often the case, when God is doing something good, that

something petty comes along to rob us of our joy in what God is doing. But for the other disciples, it must also have been acutely embarrassing and somewhat bewildering. After all, there is no record of this ever having happened before. Previously, when they drove out demons in Jesus' name, the demons just obeyed. Why didn't it work this time?

It is always difficult when our prayers go unanswered or when the gifts of the Spirit that God has given us don't seem to work. And there are no easy answers (at least not ones that actually hold up to full witness of God's Word). There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to things like healing or even exorcisms. There is only the mystery that stems from living in relationship with Jesus, one that is expressed in obedient trust, even if what we want doesn't happen.

Fiona's brother, Brian, has been used by God on a number of occasions to heal people through prayer, some of them quite dramatically. But his teenage daughter, Becky, has had M.E., Coeliac Disease and Postural Tachycardia Syndrome (or PoTS) **for approaching two years** now. I did ask permission before I shared this by the way. The result is that she is frequently exhausted by simple activities like meeting with friends or studying, has to avoid any foods with wheat in them, and gets dizzy whenever she stands up (though that is more controlled by her PoTS medication now). And despite being a grammar school student, she was only able to take one GCSE this year. It hurts. And we don't understand why. But through it all, she and her parents trust in God – not always with ease, but they trust. Healing that is sought, but doesn't come, is hard.

Of course, the Teachers of the Law would jump at the chance to have a dig at Jesus. But the *father's* anger is more understandable. The disciples had promised, "Yes we can," but when it came to it, they couldn't. And it doesn't seem like this man was necessarily coming from a place of faith. If you're already a bit sceptical, and then what you asked for doesn't happen, you're less likely to accept whatever explanations might be given, than if you are coming from a place of knowing Jesus and having experienced him in your life.

It is possible, of course, that the man's lack of belief was part of the problem. Jesus certainly sees fit to call him out on it, though not as an excuse when things went wrong, but rather as a stimulus to re-examine his beliefs. "But if you *can* do anything ..." says the man. "If you can?" Jesus responds. "Let's address this unbelief before I help you. Because that's an even bigger problem than your son's demonisation." For unbelief would ultimately lead to an eternity without God. "If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes." Sometimes unbelief can get in the way of God doing the miraculous. Though there is great danger when pray-ers tell the person they are praying for that things didn't happen because of their unbelief. That is just plain hurtful, and not what Jesus did at all. Rather, Jesus asked a question that gave the man the opportunity to respond with greater faith.

And so he did. "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" It's not the strongest declaration of faith ever heard. But it was honest and as much as the man had at that moment. And crucially, it was enough for Jesus! There was no "That's not enough; you have to *really* believe. You have to take all those unbelieving thoughts and put them to death, and choose to stand firmly with full confidence on the Word of God. Because if you have any sin of unbelief in your heart, God isn't going to work the miracle you want." There was none of that. The simple and honest, "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief," was enough for Jesus to reach out with compassion and heal the boy, from what must have been a terribly traumatic life up until then.

And the disciples' prior *inability*, and what Jesus said to them about "this kind" of demon (whatever that means), only serves to emphasise *Jesus'* power in driving even this type out. Can Jesus heal? Absolutely, yes he can! Why? Because he is God himself in human flesh. Truly, everything is possible for Jesus! That is the main message from this passage. Yes Jesus can.

But there is also a subsidiary message that comes in private conversation with the disciples afterwards, which has to do with discernment as to what God is doing and how he wants to do it, as opposed to the idea of a supposedly catch-all formula. "Why couldn't we drive it out?" the disciples ask, mystified. And the answer depends upon which Gospel you read. In Mark we read, "This kind can come out only by prayer" or some manuscripts have "by prayer and fasting." When

Jesus had done that is not explained, and nor is what he meant by “this kind” – and since the Bible doesn’t explain it is not for us to guess, still less to seek for inner knowledge about the forces of evil. But, whatever it meant, what is clear is that a discernment was needed (and lacking on the part of the disciples) as to what was needed to bring healing in this specific situation.

The end of the equivalent account in Matthew 17:20 contains a different and much sharper answer on the mouth of Jesus, “Because you have so little faith,” which is followed by an object lesson in trusting God wholeheartedly. Notice, in this instance, it is the disciples’ lack of faith that is called out as the problem not the lack of faith of the recipient of their prayers. It is quite plausible, of course, that Jesus made both statements, and that different eyewitnesses remembered different details. And, if we take the two together, we gain a better understanding of some of the dynamic necessary to see prayer for healing answered. Both faith (especially on the part of the pray-er) and discernment as to God’s will are needed. But most importantly, the power and authority of Jesus is needed. Without him, we can do nothing. But with him, we can do anything. Yes, Jesus can. And often he will.

Equally, sometimes when he doesn’t he is doing something else instead. Becky is writing a blog of her experiences and the impact they have on her Christian faith. How many people might have read a blog from her if she wasn’t struggling with these things? It is possible that right now, God wants to use her experiences to spread awareness of her condition and to glorify himself through her faithfulness. That in no way is intended as an answer to the question, “Why hasn’t God healed?” But it is an understanding that God is bringing good out of the current lack of healing. Can Jesus do amazing things in and through each of us? Yes, he can! Will we let him? That’s a different question altogether ...

Shall we pray?

[Pray]