

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – March 22nd 2009
Mark 9:14-32 Gracious Impatience

The passage that precedes this one tells the story of the Transfiguration. Peter's desire to build tabernacles is not so foolish, as the Transfiguration episode confirms that Jesus is the dwelling-place of God. His is not a walk-on part – He is utterly unique and not the latest in a series of prophets. When God spoke from the cloud saying 'This is my Son', Moses and Elijah had gone, only Jesus is there, the incomparable Son of the Living God. This most beautiful sight of Jesus appearing in His glory leaves the disciples fumbling around for words.

But eternal bliss is not at hand. We witness the glory and then we walk back down to the valley. Moses was up on the mountain with God and then returns to a rebellious people. God speaks to Elijah and then he has to go and confront King Ahab. Jesus is affirmed at His baptism and then is sent out into the wilderness. There is a pattern here of seeing the glory and then enduring suffering before we enter the Glory. cf Paul in Romans 8:17 and Philippians 3:10. We suffer in the world of sickness, grief, the demonic, cynicism, unbelief and arguments.

The disciples are desperately trying to exorcise a sick child, and Jesus sighs at their unbelief. The child's father shows what we might call an 'iffy' faith – 'But **if** you can do anything...' Jesus exclaims 'What do you mean 'if...'? Everything is possible for him who believes.' The father is in the valley of unbelief, and the statement by Jesus must seem to him cruel, because this faith is precisely what he does not have. It is a bi-polar faith: worship - doubt; trusting – questioning; hoping – worrying; believing – wavering. 'I do believe; help me in my unbelief.'

But we live in a bigger world, bigger than the one where everything is measured. Jesus is a sign of the crucifixion and then resurrection. For us sometimes it's easy and then the clouds come over and it's hard. We read stories of God providing wonderfully when there is a need, we believe that He can break in. We believe these stories, but when we are confronted it's harder.

The father has to take the risk of faith. He can talk forever about the boy's sickness, but then he has to exercise His faith. All our credentials, all our books are useless at this point. A primary encounter with Jesus requires us to trust him. The simple act of crying out to Him is enough; it does not require the father to amass a certain quantum of faith. But it is not faith in His faith but faith in Jesus.

Jesus drives out the demon with a rebuke, and the disciples ask him why they could not do that. Jesus replies that this kind can only come out by prayer. Now in Judaism there was a particular formula that was considered a powerful agent against evil spirits. For the early Church it was fasting. For Jesus it was prayer as the source of faith's power. The reason we don't see things happen is because we don't pray. Techniques do not do the stuff, but prayer needs to be made on every occasion. We cannot say that if we do things the same way as we did before then the same results will happen. No! We must pray lest we fall into presumption. There is no formula- we need to come to God fresh each time.

PT Forsyth said 'the worst sin is prayerlessness. We are left by God for lack of seeking Him.'

The most simple is the most important. We look at Jesus and everything is possible. We pray as a sign that we realise the inadequacy of our faith and rely on God.