

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Faithless Generation

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Sunday 5th August 2012

Isaiah 1:1-9, 18+19

Mark 9:14-29

In recent weeks we have seen Jesus hailed as Messiah and revealed in glory on the mountain-top. Today we come back down from the mountain-top with a bump, which is usually the way we come down from the highs of spiritual experience. We come back to what we call "the real world" and suddenly our religious experience seems ephemeral, transient. and yet, if it is real, it should still talk to what we find in the everyday world in which we are called to live.

This morning, let's put ourselves in Jesus' shoes. Jesus has been hailed as Messiah and has immediately had to correct Peter's impressions of what that means. He has had to remind the disciples that Messiah-ship includes suffering, for him. No one likes to think about suffering ahead. Then he has been on the mountain and translated with glory. We cannot know what that meant for him, but it must have been a profound experience. He has been hailed as God's Son. Now as he came down from his transfiguring experience, he is already being brought back to earth by the puzzled questions of Peter and his companions, and he finds the rest of his disciples in the middle of a contentious crowd. The Scribes are there, which means that this may be a religious controversy, and certainly means that what is said and what happens will get back to those who are beginning to range themselves against Jesus. The people saw him and came running to him. Very correctly, especially for one in his position, Jesus addresses himself to the Scribes - no point in offending anyone. But it is the distraught father who answers.

"Master, I brought you my son, who has a dumb spirit, which takes him and tears at him, so that he foams at the mouth and gnashes his teeth. I asked your disciples to cast it out and heal him, and they could not."

Looking at this case with modern knowledge, with the detailed symptoms which the father gives and Mark recalls, it is clear that the boy was likely suffering from Epilepsy. He has been brought to the disciples for healing. Why? Is it because they are known to have been sent out previously and to have performed healings? Remember we saw them do this a couple of chapters back. Or is it just because they are associated with Jesus, since he can heal it is assumed that they should know what to do? In any case the disciples can do nothing.

So this is what faces Jesus when he comes down the mountain. And his first response is to exclaim "You faithless generation! How long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?"

Who is he talking to? The father? I don't think so. He has done the best he could for his son, bringing him as near to Jesus as he can. He has acted on his faith. The crowd? The Scribes? Maybe, but they have been really little more than bystanders in the drama so far. I think he is

talking to his disciples. He is talking to those who might be expected to have most faith, and to respond to a difficult situation in terms of their faith. He is talking to Andrew and Philip and James-the-less and all the rest, because they have not met the need of the father and his son, and have allowed the problem to become a spectacle and a controversy.

It was quite a condemnation. This was the sort of language that the Hebrew prophets used of the generations that failed God before the nation was overcome and taken into exile in Babylon. It wasn't something that those who were addressed could just shrug off lightly. It was as though Robert the Bruce or William Wallace appeared at a meeting of the Scottish National Party and told them that they were poor patriots. To call any would-be faithful Jew, and the Scribes or the disciples would certainly count as would-be faithful, a faithless generation was to hit them where it would hurt most. Why would Jesus do that? Only because he meant it, only because he was really disappointed with what he found.

The disciples are condemned, because more is expected of them. They are those who have been with Jesus, who should have been imbibing his way of doing things. But, as it turns out, they had not thought to ask God's help for the boy. They had not prayed. They had forgotten the basics.

Today the church is growing and spreading in the world as never before, but not in the West, where there is the longest history of faith. Recently I was reading a fascinating account of this phenomenon, written by an African theologian, Dr. Lamin Sanneh of the Gambia. Watching the faith of the West, and he says that Europeans tolerate faith as one of the social indiscretions, he says that our religious imagination seems to have been hit with a bout of melancholy. Our soundtrack, he says, is the melancholy strains of "Abide with me" and "The day thou gavest, Lord is ended", where once it was "Onward Christian soldiers", or "Stand up, stand up for Jesus". He likens our faith to solemn vespers without the Gloria, and finishes with this telling sentence:

"It is as if Europeans have the Nunc Dimittis constantly on their lips, and so regret having to celebrate Christmas or Easter. Maybe too much history is a bad thing."

You may think that this is going too far. You may want to protest that your faith is not like that at all. But then you are not looking this way from the perspective of a continent where people queue to get into church each week. You may want to protest that you, or we, are doing the best we can, but then I expect that the disciples thought that they were doing their best as well. Jesus still found their faith lacking and said so.

The contrast in this story is between the disciples' essential faithlessness and the honest faith of the father. The father does all the right things. He brings his sick boy to Jesus, or at least, since Jesus is not available, to those who were closest to Jesus. When Jesus comes he doesn't wait for anyone else to plead his cause, he does not stand on ceremony, but tells Jesus exactly what is going on. And when Jesus challenges his words, his suggestion that maybe even Jesus cannot help and heal, when Jesus says that what is necessary is that the father himself believe, he does what the disciples had failed to do: he asks help for where his faith fails him.

The father's actions underlie the complete sincerity of his words. He believed in Jesus, and so he brought his son to him. But still he recognised the enormity of what he was asking - which the disciples' failure must have made even more clear to him - and so he slips in that little phrase "If you are able." When we pray we often ask God to do a thing if it is his will. I wonder if when we do that, say that, at the far back of our minds is the tiny question mark that says not, if it is

your will, but if you are able? Few of us really do have perfect faith. In the end Jesus does not demand it of us, even as he did not demand it of the father. What he does look for is honesty. What he does look for is that we should acknowledge that the only one who can fill the gaps in our faith is God himself.

And that, of course is what the disciples had failed to do. When at the end of the story they ask Jesus why they couldn't heal the boy, Jesus says "This kind can only come out by prayer: implying quite clearly that the disciples had failed to pray. They had thought they could do it themselves. The church has too often been guilty of that kind of thinking, coming up with schemes and plans for growth, but doing it with our own wisdom, in the power of our intelligence, but forgetting to seek the power of God. This church has begun on the road to reaching out to our families with a Messy Church initiative. If this is to do what we hope, if it is to drive out the evil of apathy from our community, and open lives to the healing presence of Jesus, then we need all to be constant and fervent in our prayers to God. Prayer is no substitute for planning and hard work, but neither is planning and hard work a substitute for prayer.

If we would not be hailed by Jesus as a faithless generation, despite our best efforts, then we need to develop the honest faith of the father. We need to know the limits of our faith, but not sit back then, saying "That's my limit, I can't do any more." We need to acknowledge our limit and then ask Jesus to increase our faith, to help us where our faith comes up short.

Amen