

+++ In the Name of Jesus +++

Title: “Prayer, Trust, and Unbelief”

Date: Sunday, 15 September 2024 (17th Sunday after Pentecost, series B // Proper 19)

Text: Mark 9:14-29

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

¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought my son to You, because he is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever 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.”

²⁰ So 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.

²¹ Jesus 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.”

²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help my unbelief!”

²⁵ When 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.” ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁹ He replied, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

I don’t know about you, but the situation Mark describes in today’s Gospel reading really grabs me in the gut. The reading starts out pretty normally, with Jesus and three of his closest disciples coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration to discover that the rest of his disciples had been “arguing with” some of “the teachers of the Law” in front of “a large crowd.” (v. 14) But we never actually hear what they were arguing about, because as soon as Jesus raises that question, a man in the crowd jumps in and starts giving a paragraph-long explanation of all the trouble he and his son have been going through. (16-18) It’s such a sad story, he just can’t help himself; his fear and worry pour out in a torrent. Finally, at the end of the story, after Jesus has patiently heard him out (and healed his son), Jesus’s disciples ask why *they* had not been able to drive that demon out of that boy. Our Lord’s answer, in the very last verse of this reading, is a bit of a puzzle. “**This kind [of demon] cannot be driven out,**” he says, “**by anything other than prayer.**” (29)

The puzzle of course is that none of the usual markers that show that prayer is going on, are present here.

- Nobody is bowing their head, closing their eyes, or folding their hands;
- there’s no “opening formula” that suggests this man *thought* he was praying (other than him calling on Jesus as “teacher”);
- there’s no “Amen” at the end to wrap things up; (17)
- and the word “prayer” doesn’t appear on anybody’s lips, anywhere in the whole story—*until* Jesus makes that little statement, right at the end, that that’s what this moving and powerful story had actually been all about.

What *made* this story a prayer, even so, is what this man *did*. Three times in a row, he *brought* his son's desperate need in front of his Saviour—*seeking* his Lord's help and *trusting* his mercy. The balance between that seeking and that trust shifted a lot as the three little sections of this story play themselves out. But all three of them are powerfully parallel to the situations you and I find ourselves in, too, when the needs of *our* loved-ones become so urgent that we both want and need to “interrupt” everything else that's going on all around us, and call out to Jesus for help.

The first time this man does this, his fear and worry are obvious. The first words out of his mouth are: “**Teacher, I brought my son to you!**” He recognized, you see, that Jesus was “above” him, in a position of power that made him *able* to help. That's why he was so eager to “**bring**” his son to Jesus. That's what prayer *is*, right there—connecting somebody's *need* to their Saviour's supply... forging a link between their *weakness* and their Saviour's power.

In a way, this man didn't really even need to do that. Jesus already knew what was going on. It's true that he was *limited* in his knowledge, according to his human nature. But even as a human being (a man in every sense), Jesus was also God, with a separate and fully-divine nature; as we'll say in a few minutes (in the words of the Apostles' Creed), he was both “**conceived by the Holy Spirit**” (*giving* him that divine nature) and “**born of the virgin Mary**” (*giving* him a full human nature). Nobody else in all of history has ever combined both of those natures in one Person.

So: No, this man *didn't* really need to lay out all the details of this situation, for his Saviour's sake; Jesus knew it all, already. But prayer, you see, is never just for our Saviour's sake. Jesus invites us to pray our own sake too. Especially when troubles tug at our hearts, stir up our emotions, and leave us feeling baffled and broken and desperate—*then*, we both need and want to pour it all out to our Saviour, telling him *all* the ins and outs of all of it.

Did you notice how this man's prayer tumbled out of him here, all in a big jumble? “**Teacher,**” he said, “**I brought my son to you—because he is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground; he foams at the mouth, he gnashes his teeth, he becomes rigid!**” (17-19) That sounds to me like this boy was suffering from epilepsy. But whatever we call it—epilepsy, demon-possession, or anything else—the bottom line is that a malady like that is not only life-threatening to the person who's afflicted by it; it's also deeply distressing to the people who witness it. You can just hear the worry and fear gushing out of this man as he pours out this painfully detailed account of his son's deep and ongoing suffering.

Curiously, though, Jesus doesn't seem to take any of *that* into account, in the first part of his response. He pivots away from this man completely, toward the crowd—speaking to them collectively, as a whole “**generation,**” and criticizing them for their lack of faith. Maybe he's using *this man's* faith as kind of a foil: “**All of you ought to be bringing your needs to me too, the way *this* guy is!**” But then, as we heard, Jesus does pivot back to this man again, when he tells him, “**Bring your son to me.**” (19)

Unfortunately, that demonic power that was inside that boy, reacted with fury as soon as it saw Jesus—“**throwing that boy into a convulsion**” so that “**he fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.**” (20) It disturbs me even to imagine such a scene!—yet Jesus takes it all in stride, asking the father calmly, “**How long as he been like this?**” (21) He sounds like a doctor in Emergency!—focusing on the facts, searching for a diagnosis, working toward a solution. Again, he doesn't *push back* against this man's distress, but lets it all spill out.

That was probably just as well, because this father just couldn't stop. He pauses just long enough to answer Jesus' question: “**My son has been like this since childhood.**” (21) But then his fear and worry come bursting out all over again, all in a rush: “**It's has often thrown him into the fire, thrown him into the water, trying to kill him! So please, Lord Jesus, if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!**” (22)

This time too, Jesus's response to this very emotional prayer is striking. Earlier, he had pivoted away from this man to challenge *the crowd's* faith. Now, he focuses on *this man's own* faith. **“What do you mean, sir, ‘IF’ I can do something? The question-mark is not on my side, but yours! Everything is possible for the person who believes.”** (23)

Maybe that sounds like a bit of a hard answer. If Jesus had been focusing on the boy's situation with the same kind of emotion that his father was, Jesus probably would have responded pretty differently. But he was just as concerned about what was going on in this father's heart, as he was about what was going on in that boy's body.

- Did this man really *believe* Jesus could help, or was he just sort of “using Jesus” as a pillow, into which he could pour out all of his fear and worry and grief?
- Was this man really prepared to *let* his Lord's will be done, or was he just so fired-up by all of his own emotions, that all he could really focus on was what *he* wanted?

For you and me too, this is a challenge, when we find ourselves in a really tough and gut-wrenching situation. It's easy to get sucked-down into all the details, right?—what happened, where it happened, how it happened, who was involved, what caused it, what's being done to help it, what we think should be done next to help it some more. We replay all that stuff, in our head, over and over again, and get *so* deeply drawn-down-into all the details that it practically consumes us. The *last* thing we want to pray is, **“Thy will be done”**: no, we want *our* will to be done, right now, Jesus, as fast as possible!

I love the way Mark acknowledges both sides of this dynamic, all the way through this story. On the one hand, yes Mark honours the desperation this poor father was going through, by telling us so much *about* this ongoing outpouring of his feelings. But along with that, Mark also keeps drawing our attention to Jesus, who consistently focuses on faith. **“Put your eyes *HERE*,”** Jesus keeps saying, all the way through this reading—first to the crowd, then to this man, then also (by implication) to us.

- “Without trusting in *me*, folks” (Jesus is saying), “your prayers are useless. *Every* tough situation you find yourselves in... *every* suffering you face... every disaster that lands on you—*all of it*, really, ought to be leading you to me!
- And *when* you fix your attention on me” (Jesus says), “*that's* when ‘**everything becomes possible.**’ *Then*, instead of bashing your head against the wall, you are actually starting to *align* yourself with the Lord who already knows what the very best outcome of that situation is going to be.
- “Instead of jumping up and down” (Jesus also says), “and saying, ‘Look at me, *my* will be done!’—*no*, you actually need to put your own will off to the side and say, **‘Yes Lord: *your* will be done, not mine!’”**

Obviously, that's hard to do—especially when someone we love is *suffering*. We want so much for them to get better (or at least we want their suffering to end). Doesn't God *see* what they're going through? (Doesn't God see what *we're* going through?) Surely, we think, if only the Lord would see this situation the way *we* do, everything would all work out just fine. If only *our* will could be done, not his, everything would all be so much better.

The problem is, that's our Old Adam speaking—our first ancestor, who (together with Eve) decided they knew better than God did. *That* became the classic temptation all of us face, again and again, in every part of life. And nowhere is that temptation stronger (or more dangerous) than when we see someone we love suffer.

On the one hand, yes we're absolutely right to follow this man's example in bringing these kinds of situations to the Lord's attention, and telling him how we feel about it. He invites us to do that, again and again in the Bible:

- **“Cast all your anxieties upon the Lord,”** we read in 1 Peter, **“because he cares for you.”** (1 Peter 5:7)

- Or again, in Philippians: **“Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication (with thanksgiving), let your requests be known to God.”** (Phil 4:6)
- Or again, in 1 Timothy: Paul urges **“that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings [should] be made for all people.”** (1 Tim 2:1)

It would be easy to pile up more verses there too, showing how good and welcome and God-pleasing it is, *for us* to bring all of our needs before the Lord, the way we see this man doing (with so much passion) here in this reading.

Along with that passion, though, we also need to put our own will on hold—or at the very least recognize (the way this man does) how much of a conflict we find ourselves, as we *try* to do this. As soon as Jesus tells him, **“Everything is possible for the person who believes,”** this man bursts out, **“I do believe; help my unbelief!”** (24) There it is, right there!—not the battle between God’s will and the situation in which we want God to enact his will, but the battle within ourselves, between God’s will and our will.

- Do I really *trust* (in this situation) that *God’s* will is the best, or am I still clinging to the illusion that *my* will is better?
- Am I more fully a child of “the old Adam” (in this situation), thrusting myself into the spotlight and insisting that *my* will be done, or am I approaching this situation as a child of “the new Adam,” my Lord Jesus Christ, who teaches us to pray, **“Not my will, Father, but yours be done”**?

Here in this reading, this father finally did figure it out. Jesus helped him to *see* how fixated he had become on his son’s need, so he could *recognize* his need for trust. Jesus helped him to *acknowledge* how tough of a battle he was going through, between those two opposite impulses, so this man could finally say, **“Yes Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief!”** Best of all, our Saviour helped this man to set those two contrary things alongside each other *in the right order*: trust in God’s will *first*, the pursuit of his own will *second*.

That is *always* how prayer works. Or at least that’s how prayer is always *supposed* to work. Sometimes, we too get that order all mixed-up. We focus so much on the suffering and need we see right there in front of us, that we forget that God is *also* already seeing, and taking into account, all sorts of other things we *can’t* see. And because God is gracious, and understands our frailty, he *lets* us do this. There’s no hint in this reading that Jesus ever *interrupted* this man, or told him he was *wrong* to keep pouring out all these details about his son’s situation. What Jesus did instead was call this man (and this crowd, and us) to *trust*. That is the key to unlocking all the possibilities that are part of God’s good, and gracious, and saving will, both for ourselves and for the ones we love. **“Yes, Lord, I do believe: help my unbelief!”**

Sometimes, God hears and answers our prayers just the way we want him to. Here in this reading, Jesus rebuked that demon, and commanded it to leave that boy. (25) Then he **“took that boy by the hand and lifted him up, so that he arose”**—even though **“he looked so much like a corpse that many people said, ‘He’s dead!’”** (26)

On the other hand, some of the people *we* pray for might have to wait a little bit longer before Jesus does the same thing for them. They might even have to *become* corpses before Jesus returns at the last day to **“take them by the hand, and lift them up, so that they too will rise”**—not just to life again here in this world, but to the infinitely better, and more fulfilling, life of the world to come.

Always, though, the challenge is the same! You and I also need to pray, in every situation: **“I believe, Lord; help my unbelief... Not my will but yours, be done.”**

Lord Jesus, grant us such faith, to trust you always, in all of our prayers. Amen.