



Matthew 17:14–18

14 When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 15 “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. 16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.” 17 “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put

up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” 18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

Reflection

In 1517, almost 500 years ago now, Raphael Sanzio began a painting of Christ's transfiguration. When he died in 1520 at the age of thirty seven, the painting was not finished, but Raphael had completed enough for us to understand it. He showed Jesus on the mountain with Peter, James and John. Everything is bathed in light. But in the same painting, at the bottom, Raphael shows the other nine disciples trying to cast a demon out of an epileptic boy and failing miserably. It is his way of saying that mountain-top experiences

and dark valleys of faltering faith coexist in the life of followers of Jesus. And it's only through faith in the power of the Son of God and a living, trusting relationship with him, that we are able to overcome sin and its effects in our world.

Jesus has just reached the bottom of the mountain of his transfiguration. The very mountain that God the Father himself had descended upon in the form of a thick cloud. The scene is reminiscent of Mount Sinai, when God appeared in similar fashion and gave Moses the Law, which represented the terms of God's relationship with his people. That's why nothing could be more precious than the Law that Moses carried down that mountain. But when Moses came down the mountain, with those two stone tablets containing the Ten Com-

mandments, he found all of Israel bowing down and worshipping a golden calf. In the emotion of the moment, he threw both stone tablets on the ground and they shattered into pieces (Ex 32). Something similar is happening in our passage today.

What immediately strikes us is the seeming harshness of Jesus' words to his disciples in verse 17,

“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

This is a rare moment of human emotion on the part of the Son of God. Jesus has accepted that he will be rejected by the official leadership of Israel, but to find him-

self repeatedly let down by his own disciples proves too much in this moment. But Jesus' strong outburst may also have had something to do with the poignancy of the scene that awaited him.

Imagine a little boy with burns on his body and fear in his eyes, but not fear of others, fear of himself. Maybe he's even restrained, tied up for his own good. He still remembers the look on his mother's face the first time that he threw himself into the fire that heats their home. Partly it was a look filled with desperate love as she burned her own hands to pull him out of that fire; and partly a look of horror at discovering the evil that lives inside him still. Her look hurt more than the flames. His father is now kneeling in utter desperation before the one person left in the world he

can turn to for help. His little boy just behind, bent on repeated self-harm against his own will. His body bears the scars to prove it and the haunted look in his eyes is the proof that it will happen again and again until this demon finally gets its way. Behind them, with shame on their faces and averting Jesus' eye, are his nine other disciples, and a crowd gathered once more for the spectacle, not out of any real faith.

All of this cut Jesus to the heart. It hurt him deeply. Sin's effects on this poor boy and his desperate father, but even more sharply, the lack of faith amongst the very men he was training to continue his work after he was gone. Another father was about to experience the pain of losing his son, God the Father, to rid this world for-

ever of the curse of sin, but it would only come about through faith. And here even the faith of his closest disciples had failed, let alone the ambivalence of the crowds. Out of the emotion of this moment Jesus rebukes not only his disciples but through them the whole crowd and their whole generation,

“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

He could only heal so many and the only way out of this is faith. Jesus is shortly going to suffer and die, and bring an impossible solution to this impossible situation, to a world utterly marred by this curse of sin. Little boys should be playing with

their friends, not lying in bed in leukaemia wards. The eternal Son of God, impossibly, is about to suffer and die, to fix all of this, to set things right again, but the only way for this to happen is through faith. And in the face of Peter rebuking Jesus (16:22), and his disciple's persistent misunderstanding and unwillingness to believe that he needs to die, and now this, Jesus speaks sharply because sometimes that's what it takes to get through to the people you love.

Why couldn't the disciples heal the boy? Especially considering Jesus had given them the power to do so back in Matthew chapter 10? In Mark's account (Mark 9:14–29) it's because they didn't pray. When you combine it with our passage today it seems that they were trying to heal in their

own strength and not in his, which is why their faith came up short.

Think

Please spend some time now thinking about our passage in the context of faith. This is the second last healing in Matthew's gospel, the focus is no longer on healing but on discipleship. It wasn't the boy's father who lacked faith in our passage, it was the disciples. In fact, since Peter began to sink as he walked on water in Matthew 14, we've seen a constant back-and-forwards between the disciples' faith and understanding, and their lack of faith and misunderstanding. Jesus expects more from them given what they've witnessed and seen. How is your faith in Jesus? In many ways we've witnessed and seen far

more than even his disciples. We have the full picture and have seen the gospel change the shape of the entire world for almost 2000 years now. Spend some time now thinking deeply over how central faith is to Christianity. What can you do to grow your faith in Jesus? Are you going about your life in your own strength and not in his? If so, what do you need to do to change? The disciples went through periods of clear-sighted faith and periods of muddled confusion when their faith faltered. Peter might be the best example. But they came good in the end. What changed everything for them? What will it take to change everything for you?

Pray

Please continue to think along these lines

and then pray to God that he would give you increased faith in Jesus. God promises that when we pray anything according to his will he will answer it (1 John 5:14) and this is exactly the type of prayer that God loves to answer. In Mark's account of this story the little boy's dad says to Jesus, '... if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.' Jesus replies ' "If you can"? Everything is possible for one who believes.' Immediately the boy's father replies 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' He speaks for so many of us doesn't he? Make his prayer your prayer this morning and just watch how God responds.