

The man at the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 27 May 2015.

As you know, we are part way through our series of talks about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. This week we are to meet a man whose name we do not know and whom I can best describe as 'the man at the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration'. You will see what I mean when I read one of the three Gospel accounts of his encounter with our Lord.

And I make no apology for the length of the reading, for that which God says in scripture itself is of far greater value than anything I could ever say about it. And our reading takes up the story on the so-called 'Mount of the Transfiguration'.

Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John ... and brought them up into a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

Then Peter ... said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you will, let us make here three tabernacles (or, booths): one for you, ... one for Moses, and one for Elijah'.

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and, behold, a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!'

And when the disciples heard it, they fell upon their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, 'Arise, and be not afraid'.¹

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain,² and had come to the other disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Him, were utterly amazed,³ and ran up to Him and greeted Him. And He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'

And one of the crowd answered Him, 'Teacher, I brought to you my son, who has a spirit⁴ which makes him mute.⁵ And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid.⁶ So I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not'.

... 'Bring him to me', Jesus responded. And they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, 'How long has he been like this?'

And he said, 'Ever since he was a child. And many times it has cast him into fire⁷ and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us'.

And Jesus said to him, 'If you can'? All things are possible to him who believes'.

And immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying, 'Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again!' Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly,⁸ and came out of him. And he became as one dead ...

But Jesus grasped⁹ him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when He had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, 'Why were we not able to cast it out?' And He said to them, 'This kind can be driven out by nothing but prayer'.¹⁰

So it was that our Lord came down from the mountain, which was for Him at the time a Mount of glory and splendour, to the place of distress and misery ... from the place where heaven visited earth for a night to the place where the powers of darkness reigned ... that He might address and meet the desperate need of the man who is our character for this morning – and the need, of course, of the man's son (his only child, as we learn from elsewhere¹¹).

For, as we have read, this young boy was not only possessed by a demonic power¹² – by an 'unclean spirit' – but by a particularly nasty, strong and malicious spirit – as witness our Lord's statement that '*This kind* can be driven out by nothing but prayer' – an expression which singled out this spirit as no ordinary, run-of-the-mill demon. For this demon had successfully withstood and baffled the combined attempts of nine apostles to expel it.

The father's original intention had been to bring his boy to Jesus Himself – 'Teacher, I brought to you my son', he explained to the Lord – but, when he found that Jesus was up the mountain with Peter, James and John,

he had referred the case to the Lord's other disciples. Nor was this in any way surprising, for it was well known not only that some time before the Lord had given His disciples authority to cast out demons,¹³ but that subsequently they had done just that – and done it very successfully.¹⁴

But this time they had been nonplussed. I suspect that, on the basis of their past successes, they had taken it for granted that they possessed sufficient power in themselves, and that they therefore felt no need for renewed dependence on God, and had therefore neglected to pray to Him for His help and power. Hence they failed miserably.

In answer to the Lord's tender and poignant question, 'How long has he been like this?', the father disclosed that his son's sad and distressing condition had been, not only more or less lifelong ('ever since he was a child'), but that since then it had manifested itself frequently ('many times it {the demon} has cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him'). 'If you can do anything', he pleaded, 'have compassion on us and help us'.

We can hardly blame the man for his doubts that Jesus could deliver his boy. After all, the painful disappointment which he had felt when the nine disciples had failed to do so was calculated to weaken his confidence in our Lord's power to help them. For if, as was well known, the disciple's ability and authority over demons derived from His, in the mind of this father their failure called in question Jesus' own ability to set his son free. Hence the man's, 'If you can do anything'.

But Jesus gently turned the man's 'if' back on him ... 'Jesus said to him, "If you can"? All things are possible to him who believes'. In effect, the Lord was saying, 'The question, sir, isn't "if I can" but "if you can". The point at issue isn't my power but your faith. Do you believe I can do this?'

In his earlier appeal, the father had linked his son with himself, pleading, 'have compassion on us and *help* us', but now in response he focuses his request for 'help' on himself alone and on what he has been told is his greatest need, 'I believe; *help* my unbelief'.

In one breath, he asserts that he does believe and yet acknowledges his 'unbelief'. And yet which of us do not feel at times that apparent contradiction in ourselves?¹⁵

But it was enough! The Saviour now addressed the unclean spirit: 'I' (and the word is emphatic. In effect, 'Not now one – or nine – of my disciples, but I) command you, come out of him and never enter him again!' It was all over. The unwelcome tenant was served notice to quit by the sovereign Lord of the universe, and even the exceptionally strong demon at the foot of the mount was no match for Him and His all-powerful edict.

For we read that, after one last shriek and malicious attempt to destroy the boy, 'the spirit ... came out of him'.¹⁶ And our Lord's closing words to the spirit, 'and *never* enter him *again*', were clearly meant to contrast with the long-term affliction and frequent seizures which the young boy had suffered in the past. The father's plea had been granted – his son was free.

How reassuring for us to know that there is no case of need – of sin, of wretchedness or of whatever – beyond the power of the Lord Jesus to deal with.

I began this morning by reading the gospel account of the Mount of the Transfiguration. If you want to learn more about that passage, and happen to be free on this coming Lord's day evening, you are very welcome to join us in the main hall at 6 o'clock, when, God willing, I shall be preaching from it.

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 17. 1-8. In Raphael's picture of the Transfiguration, which has often been called the greatest of all paintings, the foreground is occupied by a vivid representation of this marvellous miracle wrought by our Lord upon his descent from the mountain. The conjunction of the two incidents, which are in such striking contrast with each other, seems suggestive. The native glory of the Redeemer shone forth in the presence of the three favoured disciples upon the holy mount. But the redemptive work of the Son of God is brought out most prominently by his mighty work of healing, in which he shows himself able to deliver a human sufferer from the agonies of a terrible disease, and from the clutches of a cruel foe. The one incident serves to bring out the other into a bolder relief; and the two must be taken together, in order that we may obtain a fair and complete view of the nature, and especially of the ministry, of Jesus. (Pulpit Commentary: Mark 9.)

² Luke 9. 37.

³ Why were they 'utterly amazed' when they beheld Him? Possibly His appearance displayed some lingering, residual effects of the transfiguration – just as Moses's face shone when he came down from the mount, which made the people afraid to come near him, Exod. 34. 30. Might it be also that his garments were still somewhat radiant from the transfiguration? It is interesting that Moses similarly, when he came down from the mount, found the camp of Israel in great disorder.

⁴ Three of the common New Testament names for evil spirits are also used here: 'spirit' (Mark 9. 17, 20); an 'unclean spirit' (Mark 9. 25; Luke 9. 42); and a 'demon' (Luke 9. 42; cf. Mark 7. 18).

⁵ Seemingly the spirit kept him from speaking during the seizures. Because the spirit causes muteness during seizures, there's no verbal attempt to ward off Jesus (contrast Mark 1. 24; 5. 7).

⁶ The spirit 'mauled/shattered/crushed/bruised' him, Luke 9. 39. Epilepsy and demonic possession are clearly distinguished in Matt. 4. 24.

⁷ The boy was therefore probably disfigured from burn scars.

⁸ The obstinacy shown by this particular demon stands in marked contrast to the cowed, supplicating attitude shown by the Gerasene 'Legion', Mark 5. 1-13.

⁹ Κρατησας – to use strength. The Lord gripped the boy's hand firmly.

¹⁰ Mark 9. 14-27. The failure of the disciples was not because of any insufficiency of power in Jesus, but was due to their own failure to appropriate that power by faith (Matt. 17. 20) and prayer.

¹¹ Luke 9. 38.

¹² Luke 9. 42.

¹³ Mark 3. 15.

¹⁴ Mark 6. 13.

¹⁵ 'He declares that he believes and yet acknowledges himself to have unbelief. These two statements may appear to contradict each other but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself'. Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 32: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Part II, Paragraph 24.

¹⁶ 'Like an outgoing tenant, that cares not what mischief he does to the house that he is quitting'.