

SERMON – 2/2/20
'Belief and Faith'

Mark 9:14-29

“Everything is possible for the person who has faith.” (Mark 9:23)

Last Sunday morning we thought a bit about what it means to be a witness for Christ and to be ready to answer anyone who asks us to explain the hope we have. We considered what evidence our personal experience of God gives us to offer others who may be searching for meaning in life and which may actually be the crucial piece of the jigsaw puzzle that helps them to see the whole picture. Last Sunday evening those who gathered to view the first of the God Question programmes had a stimulating discussion about the evidence that is out there is the created order of the cosmos that points not only to the existence of God but to the nature of a generous God who loves everything He has made.

As we continue to think this morning about how we might be more confident in our faith and less hesitant in speaking about it, I would like to home in on the question of the faith which lies at the root of our hope and to explore with you something of what faith actually is.

Now, it seems to me that one of the things that ought to characterise us as Christians but which is often missing in practice is an active believing. That may strike you as a surprising thing to say because, surely, believing - having faith – is of the very essence of being a Christian. Yet we are often little different from our non-churchgoing friends in our hopeless frustration with the ills of the world; when faced with difficulties, we seldom look for the miraculous; and on the whole we prefer to get on with things ourselves rather than bringing God into the everyday things of life by praying about them. In what way, then, does our profession of faith as members of Christ's Church make us stand out from the crowd here in Kinross?

If Jesus Himself were to walk into our company this morning in the way that he walked into the crowd in our Gospel reading earlier, possibly even finding us squabbling as he found them, would He not with good cause be able to address *us* also as 'unbelieving' people who are pretty ineffective in fulfilling our calling as His disciples? When we ponder why our efforts in promoting the message of the Gospel are so often ineffectual (in the way that the disciples asked the Lord why they were unable to cast the demon

out of a little boy) would He not justifiably say to *us* too that it is because we are not praying about the obstacles we cannot get over?

The Lord Jesus is returning from sharing with his three closest followers, Peter, James and John, in the mountain-top experience to end all mountain-top experiences, what is known as the Transfiguration. There in the cloud they have just been in the very presence of God Himself and have seen Christ speaking with Moses and Elijah. Surely there could be no doubt left in the minds of these three disciples at least that Jesus was the Son of God. Surely they could see now that nothing was impossible with God, and yet no sooner are they back down to earth again and they come upon a real-life situation of need and they find the other disciples powerless to help. In our passage this morning Jesus makes it clear to them that the key to the resolution of that situation (and with it, we must suppose, other situations of seemingly impossible human need including those *we* face in our time) is to be found in faith and in prayer. As J. P Meier suggests, “the little faith of the disciples is a faith that understands and assents but which does not trust God totally.” Could that be the problem with *us*, my friends?

It is worth pointing out at this stage, I think, that although the boy’s physical symptoms are of epilepsy or some such physical condition, we are told that the root problem in this case is not physical but spiritual. Although we tend not to talk in these terms in our context, we should not simply dismiss the idea that there may be spiritual causes lying beneath apparently physical problems. The Bible is not saying that epilepsy or any other medical condition is necessarily caused by evil spirits, only that in this case the problem was a spiritual one not a physical one. One of the issues that we face in our time is that we always tend to look for the rational explanation, we examine the world around us (and the highs and lows that people experience in it) from the perspective of the physical only and with little or no regard for the spiritual. In our Western society the appeal to the purely rational has had an impact on the church, not only in making it harder for us to communicate both to those people who have a mindset that dismisses the spiritual and the supernatural or indeed to those who are actually *more* interested in the spiritual and the supernatural than many within the church, but also in persuading the *church* that we should attach less value to our believing than we should.

So as we consider the place of belief in the spiritual and supernatural faith in the life of the Christian, there are three things that I would like to put to you for your consideration this morning.

Firstly, let me suggest that faith is not so much about what we believe but about who we trust. I quoted J.P Meier a moment ago who suggested that the disciples had a faith that understood and assented but which did not trust God totally, and what I think he means by that is that although the disciples *believed* with all their mind and heart that their teacher Jesus was the very Son of God, they were not able to make that belief count where it mattered. Their faith was something that existed inside or ‘up there somewhere’ – perhaps almost left behind on the mountain-top – but which did not have an impact on their circumstances. It was something that gave them great personal comfort and hope but it was not something they could share with anyone else or use to the benefit of those around them. Does that not explain Jesus’ exasperation in our reading when He is called in personally to the midst of an argument and rescue His followers from their inability to help the struggling, suffering boy – ‘How unbelieving you people are! How long must I stay with you? How long do I have to put up with you?’ The disciples undoubtedly believe that Jesus is powerful but they are not prepared to trust Him enough to work through them too.

Many of us leave our faith behind on the mountain-top – in church or in memories of joyful experiences of conviction and hope – and we fail to trust God to be the same (to wield the same transforming power) in our daily lives, in our homes and at our work and in our streets and amongst our friends. Our Christian responsibility is believing – and by that, I mean trusting God totally.

Secondly, before we throw in the towel and say that we just don’t have that kind of faith, let me remind you of the fact that faith is the gift of God. Many Christians beat themselves up over their inability to summon enough faith to be the kind of disciple that they want to be and that they feel they ought to be, but surely the essence of believing in God is recognising that *we* are the ones who need *His* help, and that includes believing in the first place. In the apostle Paul’s famous words: ‘It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, *it is the gift of God.*’ He is writing there, of course, about coming to a saving faith in Christ, but the same holds true, I believe, of the kind of faith we are called to exercise in

daily life. Having faith and exercising faith is not meant to be a struggle that we wear ourselves out over but a childlike receiving from God and a waiting upon Him to do what *He* pleases and *He* is able to do through us. It is ridiculous to suggest that when Jesus says to His disciples, ‘Everything is possible for the person who has faith’ He is waiting for *them* to achieve the impossible – where is the faith in that? No, He is reassuring them (and us) that when His followers open themselves to God, when we make ourselves available to Him, *He* will do great things. Which is what makes the statement the boy's father makes in our reading one that should often be on our hearts and on our lips: “I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more!” Or to put it another way, “I do believe, help my unbelief.”

Which takes us straight to the final point. When we read the words of Jesus in our passage this morning, I think most of us are inclined to despair at the chasm which seems to open up between our experience and what seems to be expected of us. Jesus said, “Everything is possible for the person who has faith.” Everything? Really?

In Matthew's account of this episode, Jesus is quoted as saying: “If you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this hill, ‘Go from here to there!’ and it will go. You could do anything!” In my mind’s eye, a picture of a huge obstacle immediately raises itself – a mountain! How can something like that ever move, let alone *be* moved? Am I the only one that is prompted to wonder if there is any point in attempting to move actual mountains? What would it achieve? Well, to think like that is to miss the point entirely. We are not meant to get caught up in some esoteric discussion about the advisability or the possibility of rearranging the geography, although mountains very powerfully represent the kind of obstacles that we all face in life (such as dealing with suffering or ill-health or something else that prevents us from living life to the full). No, our focus should be on the mustard seed – the smallest of all the seeds, Jesus says elsewhere, that grows into one of the largest plants. The question is not ‘how big is your faith?’ but rather ‘how big is the God in whom you put that faith?’

It comes back again and again to the Lord Himself – keep your eye on Him, not on the obstacle that is in your way; keep your eye on Him, not on the insignificant faith that you struggle to muster; keep your eye on Him, not

on yourself and your own attempts to sew everything up; keep your eye on Him as you put your hand in His and walk forward.

Believing is one of our primary Christian responsibilities – not a belief that is locked away in our minds or in a book, not a faith that is left behind in church after a weekly recharge, but a living trust in a living God that has an impact on every moment, on every action, on every person with whom we have to do. Believing is not something that we should be anxious about or feel that we have to strive for – it is the gift of God Himself. In simply but profound words that I was reminded of only yesterday, 'Let go and let God.' All we need is a little faith in a great big God and to let that loose in the ordinary, everyday things of life so that when we come up against the big obstacles our focus is on the One who is even bigger than they are.

Jesus said, "Everything is possible for the person who has faith." Take your faith out of the church, out of the book, out of the mind and let it loose in the moment. Whatever it is that is uppermost in your thoughts at this time, simply hand it over to God and leave it with *Him*. That is when faith results in what otherwise seems impossible.