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Hopeful yearning

Bible reading: Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

'What are you arguing with them about?' he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought you my son, who 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, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.'

'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.'

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.

Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?' 'From childhood,' he answered. '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.'

'If you can?' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for one who believes.'

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'

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.'

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, 'He's dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?'

He replied, 'This kind can come out only by prayer.'

Reflection

As I write this the COVID-19 statistics show worrying signs. 16,135 new cases recorded on 23 June, a rise in the weekly average of 43.9%, and 19 deaths, a rise of 53% over the previous week. On 19 June, 211 people were admitted to hospital and hospitalisations had risen by 24.8% in the preceding week.

I live in Herefordshire where we have so far been spared the impact of the Delta variant: the county recorded 13 positive tests, with no hospitalisations or deaths within the last week. However, the national trends are impacting on local confidence with many events planned for the targeted end of lockdown on 21 June 21, and subsequently put on hold until after 19 July, are now being indefinitely postponed. A re-enactment of the Battle of Mortimer's Cross to be held on the village green in September has been cancelled; a major factor in the decision was people's fear of visitors bringing a third wave.

Whilst locally many agree with the need to be cautious, others are growing more anxious for the economic and mental health repercussions of further lockdown measures. They argue that vaccination should suffice. We all want an end to COVID-19, but the path to health is fraught with difficulty.

This story from Luke's Gospel is not about COVID-19 – the symptoms of the boy suggest epilepsy experienced from a young age – but his path to health is also fraught with difficulty. The story takes place in a public arena rife with controversy. Why are the teachers of the law arguing with the disciples? Healing doesn't happen as expected, and failure leads to blame: it's the disciples' fault.

However, behind the blame is hopeful yearning: 'If you can do anything, take pity'. When Jesus retorts that everything is possible to him who believes, the human predicament is expressed: 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.' After the boy is healed, even Jesus acknowledged the difficulties: 'this kind can come out only by prayer.'

This Bible story surely acts as a mirror of our current position as we journey towards post lockdown restoration. It contains the longing to be healed, the need to find solutions, the blame when things don't happen as expected and, ultimately, the triumph of a loving God who heals in spite of our divisions and our unbelief.

Prayer

Lord we long for restoration, but we are tired, confused and fearful,

unsure of what is going to happen.

We are encouraged by the vaccination programme,

but anxious about the news of rising cases, new variants and the uncertainties that brings.

We are ready to apportion blame and take out our frustrations for the impact that decisions are having on our lives, economy and well-being.

But we also have faith, however limited that may be.

Please take that faith and transform it,

so that as you brought clarity, healing and hope to a desperate situation,

we may also bring healing and hope to our communities, in your name.

Amen.

Response

The father had faith enough to bring his son to Jesus in the first place, but then encountered all sorts of difficulties. He freely admitted the deficiencies in his faith in the famous cry, 'I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief'.

Although Jesus always challenges us to go deeper in faith, it is good to remember that even the faith we have (however inadequate) is still a response to God's love and was brought about by his stirring of our heart.

Let's thank God for the faith we have, whilst longing for it to be transformed and deepened.

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