

Eastwood Baptist (6 PM, 4/3/'18) **ONLY BY PRAYER**" (Mark 9:14-29)

Introduction How do you feel when you see someone in distress? Most of us are affected by their distress, and begin to feel some measure of distress ourselves. What if it involves a child? For most of us, this makes it worse. And what if this person wants us to help, but we are unable to do so? Surely this is worse still. When Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain, and from their wonderful experience on the mountain, this is the kind of situation which they encountered.

Without Strength and Without Faith (9:14-19b) Initially, what Jesus and the three disciples encountered was a mixture of amazement and argument (**vv.14-16**). The crowd reacted to Jesus with amazement, or wonder. Why so? Was it just his reputation, and their excitement after a long wait? Or was there still something unusual about his appearance, like Moses' radiant face when he descended from Mount Sinai? I'm not sure about this. What is clear is that they did react with amazement. But there was also argument, involving the nine disciples and the teachers of the Law, and Jesus asks about this argument. It is not clear whom Jesus asks. The position of the sentence, immediately after v.15, might suggest that it is the crowd, but the words "with them" might suggest that it is the disciples, arguing with the teachers of the Law. Whichever it is, it is a man in the crowd who answers, and we hear his heart-rending story about his son. **Read vv.17-18.** Mark conveys to us the man's distress, in a manner which invites our compassion. And compassion is always a good place to begin in such a situation. Jesus' response (**v.19ab**) raises questions. In particular, whom is Jesus addressing as "a generation without faith"? Certainly not the man individually, since "generation" is a group term. I think that it makes best sense as applying generally to the people of Jesus' day, but probably with particular reference to the disciples. After all, it is the disciples who could not drive out the evil spirit. More literally, they were not strong enough. Jesus' words sound like a cry of pain, a lament, expressing something like, "How long will I continue with you and yet you will continue to be without faith?" I think that we should be slow to feel superior to the disciples. Might not Jesus sometimes lament over us, as individuals and as a church?

Jesus' Strength and Our Faith (9:19c-24) Verse 19 ends on a more positive note - **read.** Jesus takes action, acting (I think) out of his compassion for the boy and his father. Also, it will emerge, for the sake of his disciples. When we read on, however, we might at first think that Jesus is a bit slow to drive out the demon. **Read vv.20-21a.** We need to remember that Jesus is ministering not only to the boy but also to his father, and to a lesser extent to the disciples and the crowd. **Read vv.**

21b-22. The father focuses on Jesus' ability, Jesus' strength. This is understandable if we think about his recent experience with this man's disciples, who were not strong enough to drive out the demon. **Read v.23.** Jesus turns the focus away from his own strength, or ability, and onto the father's faith. I feel for the father, don't you? But Jesus isn't blaming the father, rather he is drawing him forward into faith and the restoration of his son, as we are about to see.

Read v.24. The father responds honestly to Jesus: "I have faith; help my lack of faith." In the light of what follows, this is one of the most helpful of all biblical references to faith. The father has some faith, certainly enough faith in Jesus to cry out to him for help, although he is aware of the struggling character of his faith. But Jesus responds positively to this struggling faith. And he responds the same way to our struggling faith. We don't need to have unwavering faith before we can expect help from Jesus; we need to have enough faith to cry out to Jesus; we need to trust him enough to trust him even with our struggle. I have often found it helpful to remember this, helpful both to me and to people to whom I have ministered.

Jesus' Strength and Our Prayer (9:25-29) Jesus' act of driving out the evil spirit is simple - he simply commands it to come out and never return. **Read v.25.** This is Jesus' authority over demons. This is part of an even wider authority which Jesus has. This is important for us to remember if we ever encounter a demon. It is not the Christian who is strong enough to drive out a demon, not even the gifted Christian; it is Jesus Christ who is strong enough. This is important for us to remember not just if ever confronted with a demon, but in all challenging situations. Our greatest resource is the power and authority of Jesus Christ. But Jesus hasn't quite finished with the boy. **Read vv.26-27.** Jesus reaches out to the boy and takes him by the hand, and he lifts him to his feet. Jesus is not simply against the demon; he is for the boy. And Jesus is for all those who put their trust in him. Finally Jesus ministers to the disciples - **read vv.28-29.** No doubt the disciples were impressed and relieved when they saw Jesus drive out the demon. But I think that they would also have been disappointed in themselves, remembering their earlier failure, and probably they would have been thinking of Jesus' words about a generation without faith. If so, however, it would have helped them if they had also thought about the struggling faith of the father. Jesus now encourages and instructs the disciples. He tells them that God can use them to drive out demons, but only if they pray. Some manuscripts add "fasting" to "prayer", but the manuscript evidence favours "prayer" alone. The reference to fasting was probably added during the early history of the church. It is probably justified, given what Jesus has just done, to

assume that this prayer ought to be in the name of Jesus. I believe that we can hear Jesus' encouragement and instruction as disciples today. God is still prepared to use us to drive out demons, and to do other great things in Jesus' name. But we must rely on Jesus in prayer. There are those who say that Christians, filled by the Holy Spirit, can behave just like Jesus. I believe that the Gospels don't support this view. Jesus is unique, and speaks and acts with a unique authority. In this story there is no record of his having prayed, simply of his commanding the demon. But he insists that prayer is essential for his disciples.

In facing demons, and in facing many things, we are not strong enough in ourselves, even as Christians. It continues to be Jesus who is strong enough, so we are called to trust him and to pray. And Jesus will hear us, even if our faith is like the struggling faith of the father.