

A Meditation from Fr. Geoff for the Sunday of St. John of the Ladder (22 March 2020)

Gospel: Mark 9.17-31

This week, we have a very dramatic gospel reading. Our story takes place right after the Transfiguration, when Christ was uniquely revealed as the Divine Son to Peter, James and John. And they've come down Mount Tabor to find the other disciples, surrounded by a "great crowd" and arguing with some of the scribes.

Someone from the crowd comes forward and asks Jesus to heal his son: "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out but they could not do so."

A few chapters earlier, Jesus had commissioned his disciples. "He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits... They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." (Mark 6.7-13)

But now his disciples are unable to do it. And this man, whose son has been tormented by this unclean spirit "from his childhood" (verse 21) stands before Jesus. He explains that the demon "often casts him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him..."

"But," says the man to Jesus, "if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us!"

Jesus, curiously, seems a bit exasperated in this story. When he hears that his disciples were unable to cast out the spirit, he exclaims: "You faithless generation! How much longer must I be among you!" And now, when the father of the child says, "If you are able to do anything," Jesus replies, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes."

And then the man makes a deeply honest statement and request to Jesus: "I believe; help my unbelief." And this, when we're honest, becomes our own prayer: Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

We are followers of Christ. We have been baptized into his Body and sealed by his Spirit. We believe. We make our acts of faith. We confess our beliefs in the Creed. As we are able, we avail ourselves of Christ's sacramental presence. And we pray for God's will to be done.

But if we are honest, we will also realize how far short we fall in our faith. When something goes wrong, we *first* try to take care of things in our own strength, with our own ingenuity. We make our plans as if it all depends on us, as if we were the ones in control. All too often, our recourse to Christ is a last-ditch effort in moments of exasperation. We turn to God as a last resort, rather than our constant Provider.

The disciples seem to have not had enough faith in Christ to cast out the demon. And the man's faith itself seems questionable – "If you are able," he asks Jesus. And with this admission, it was enough: Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. The Lord knows our weaknesses. Our lack of faith – our failure to trust – is no surprise to him.

But we are called to have faith nonetheless. Not simply faith in the sense of "belief" the way that we believe certain things about God – things like what we recite in the Creed – as important as these beliefs

are. But we are called to have faith, to believe, in the sense of trusting in the Lord; believing his Word; believing his promises to us.

That man's faith, his trust in the Lord, was an honest faith. He knew he was liable to falter and to fail. So he trusted the Lord even for his faith itself. And Jesus rebuked the spirit and healed his son.

In St. Matthew's telling of this same story (Matthew 17.14-20) Jesus uses this healing as an opportunity to teach more about faith. He explicitly links the disciples' inability to cast out the demon with their "little faith."

But then Jesus tells them that it's not actually all that much faith that is needed: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17.20)

Jesus is not looking for our perfection; he's looking for our honest faith, our trust. And if we are honest with ourselves, we will – like the man in today's story – say, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." We know we don't trust as we should. But we can trust the Lord even with our lack of trust. And then *he himself* will bring about the change in our hearts and our lives. For he is both the author and the perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12.2).

Christ is among us!
He is and will be!