

HEALING OF THE EPILEPTIC BOY St Matt. 17: 14 – 23

The account of the healing of the epileptic boy, which we have just heard, appears in all three Synoptic Gospels and follows on immediately from the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor when the Lord descends from the mountain with the three disciples, Peter, James and John who witnessed the events there. A crowd has assembled and there seems to be a heated argument going on when they arrive. An angry father complains that he feels short-changed because he has brought his epileptic son to the disciples but despite their reputation and their past performance, which has no doubt spread far and wide, they are unable to heal the boy. In a display of annoyance reported almost identically in all three accounts the Lord reprimands them for their 'apistia', their lack of faith, with the words 'You faithless and perverse generation! How long am I to be with you? How long am I to put up with you?' He then calls the boy to him and commands the demon to depart from him. The boy is convulsed, falls down as if dead, and is lifted up, restored to health, the epilepsy gone. If you have ever seen epilepsy take its effect you will know how frightening a fit or seizure can be. At school I had a talented teacher of Classics who more than once had fits in our presence; once while he was writing on the board he suddenly fell down shaking and foaming at the mouth to the consternation and confusion of the whole class.

One can feel immediate sympathy for the disciples who have conspicuously failed to cure the boy despite their good intentions while their master deals with the illness or the demon so authoritatively and so quickly. Understandably, they want to know the reason for their lack of success and they are given two answers: The first is their lack of faith and the second is their technique. The Lord explains that this kind only goes out through prayer and some texts read 'prayer and fasting'.

There are some giants of faith in the Gospels, even outside the people of Israel, the Canaanite woman and the centurion, to name but two, and there is a long list of heroes of faith from the Old Testament which is frequently read at the Liturgy from the Epistle to the Hebrews. No doubt most of us are to be included in the group entitled a faithless generation, so it is worth looking at how we can improve our faith, to do good on the earth and advance the Kingdom like the Lord and his disciples. Among the parables of the Lord is the story of the mustard seed, which is likened to faith. It begins life as the smallest of seeds but it grows slowly and invisibly until it becomes so big that the birds come and nest in it. No doubt the birds are somehow those who are attracted by our faith and come to bask in the rays of its sunshine. Our faith therefore, despite what we may think to the contrary, is dynamic, constantly growing and somehow enlightening others. We may not feel it and that is a good thing but by being faithful to Christ we are affecting those around us. In the life of the prophet Elijah during his stay with the widow of Zarephath her son suddenly dies. Elijah prays for his life and the boy is restored to her. As a result she experiences a profound deepening of her faith expressed in the words, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth". Some of our steps forward in faith are equally dramatic. I am sure many here today could relate incidents which have caused their trust in God to advance in a similar way.

Then another way our faith is deepened according to the scriptures is through suffering. Things go badly wrong and not as we would wish them. We may experience tragedy, the death of a loved one, divorce, family break up. Life becomes extremely hard and God seems not to be near. We appear to be on our own and in every sense our life is in a crisis. This is not unfamiliar territory but that does not make it any easier. The sufferings of Job seem painfully familiar. But we are told not to be surprised at this. Our faith is being tested and we need to remain steadfast. This experience is strangely one to be cherished. We lose all appetite for worldly things especially at a bereavement or death of a loved one. We reach further down within ourselves and we find hidden depths in our souls and unexpected joy at meeting Christ there. He has been with us throughout the entire difficult experience and understands our need of comfort.

And then Christ says that the power to heal and overcome evil is through prayer and fasting. In the Orthodox Tradition this is a fundamental part of how we live our faith in the Church. We have four fasts in the year. The longer ones before Pascha and Christmas and two shorter before the Feast of St Peter and Paul and the Falling Asleep or Dormition of the Mother of God, which falls on Tuesday in the coming week. In addition we have a fast on most Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. The fasts work together with prayer not only to enrich ourselves by going more deeply into our hearts but also to strengthen the power of the Church in the world and making the Light of Christ more visible to others. How this works is indeed a mystery but in the prayer of the second Little Litany in the Divine Liturgy the priest reads these words silently: "O Thou who hast given us grace to make these prayers in concord and hast promised that where two or three agree in Thy Name Thou wilt grant their requests; fulfil now the petitions of Thy servants as is good for them." And the Lord also promises us that where two or three are gathered in His Name. He is in the midst of them.

So in fact great power is given to the Church when we assemble together in unity and oneness of prayer. The Acts of the Apostles gives us a great insight into the power of the prayer of the Early Church. When Peter was thrown into prison we read that earnest prayer was made by the Church for him and an angel appeared to him in his cell in the depths of the night and guided him out of the prison. Christ speaks of the willingness of the Father to grant our requests if we ask correctly. "What father among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? How much more will he give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Today's Gospel is meant not to discourage us from asking but rather to remind us of the power which lies within us both individually and especially as the assembled members of Christ's Body. Let us look to the works of the Lord during his earthly ministry and let us be encouraged by His presence in each one of us to have a greater vision of the faith that lies within us and the power of prayer.

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