

Homily: St. John Climacus 2013- 4th Sunday of Lent

One afternoon I was having a nap in my son, Nicholas' room, away from the noise and the dogs and everything else, and as I woke from a very pleasant little rest, I noticed a wooden red medieval-looking shield on the wall. It was one of two that I had bought in London years ago for Nicholas and Paul when they were quite small. And as I stared at the shield in that drowsy, half-awake/half-asleep kind of way, my mind skipped quickly over the past twenty or so years since I had bought those shields. And I thought- where have all the years gone so quickly! How much has happened! How much has changed! And then I thought- you know, I thought life, especially Christian life, the spiritual journey, was supposed to get easier as you got older. But it hasn't. In many ways, it seems to have gotten harder.

Then after I got up from my slumbers and had a drink, I came across a story about hikers on a mountain walk. After ambling along gently for awhile, they eventually hit a steeper incline after a few hours as they neared their destination up the mountain. It wasn't too bad, but then, suddenly, as they turned a corner on the path, they came face to face with a terrifying 100-foot wall of sheer rock. It had a very rudimentary wooden ladder reaching to the top. So, if the hikers wanted to go any further on the pathway, they had to do some serious climbing. They could either turn back or they could summon up new courage and new energy and begin to climb. That was the choice.

These two experiences capture the mood that Mark wants us to catch, I think, in today's gospel reading about the healing of the demon-possessed boy- 1) things don't necessarily get easier as the journey proceeds, and 2) when we hit the wall, there's a choice that has to be made about going on or giving up.

This healing story takes place in Mark's gospel just after two significant events- Jesus' little argument with Peter and the other disciples at Caesarea Philippi when He told them that it was now time for Him to head up to Jerusalem and to take up the cross, and then a few days later He takes three disciples up the mountain where they experience the Transfiguration. And now this rather problematic and messy healing event comes right on the heels of the glory of the Transfiguration.

The mood in this healing story is rather tense- the disciples can't deal with a problem they've encountered, the crowd is rather impatient with them because of this inability, the father of the boy is in tears and isn't quite sure if even Jesus can do anything about the situation. A corner of some kind seems to have been turned, and everything is now less easy and more demanding than it was. In the first half of the gospel, lots of people come to Jesus with what appears like pretty easy faith. They touch Him and get healed. And up until now, following Jesus has been comparatively easy for the disciples. From here on, though, it's going to get harder and harder.

This healing in particular begins with a problem for them. They had previously been able to cast out demons in Jesus' name, but this one has them beaten. They're puzzled

because they don't know why it hasn't worked this time. Later in the story Jesus will tell them that it's going to take prayer, or prayer and fasting in some of the ancient editions of Mark's gospel. In other words, it's going to require some more effort, some more focused spiritual effort, and some more reliance on God.

It's like coming around that corner on a mountain trail and being confronted with a 100-foot wall, and the only way forward is the climb up a rickety ladder. It's not what the disciples had anticipated. They, and often we, think that following Jesus is always going to be like the earlier gentle stroll on a hardly-noticeable incline. But the disciples have turned a corner in their pilgrimage with Jesus; now it's getting harder. I think that like the disciples we often get puzzled when things don't go as we had anticipated, when situations get more complex, when people fail us. We often suppose that the early years of our Christian journey were the difficult ones, and that now as we go on in the Christian life things will get easier, more straightforward, clearer. But the opposite is often the case. It seems that the more we learn to walk beside Jesus, the more we are given harder tasks, more difficult challenges, which demand more courage and more spiritual energy. The sheer wall of rock that didn't meet us at the beginning of the journey now unexpectedly confronts us.

This healing incident seems to have made even Jesus reflect on just how bad things were getting. His first response to the problem is a rather sorrowful comment on "this faithless generation", and to wonder aloud about how much longer He'll be around with them. The crowd's prurient but faithless interest in what's happening and the disciples'

inability to deal with the situation, seem to say to Jesus that whatever is going on here it isn't *faith*.

For the father of the boy, the man at the center of the fuss, faith, in this situation, is really very hard, and he's the one who says so. The father says to Jesus, almost with a shrug, "If there is anything that you can do. . .". Jesus responds- and you're not quite sure whether it's in a teasing kind of way or just a little testy- "If you can! What do you mean, "If you can"? Everything is possible for someone who believes." This now puts the father on the spot. It's his turn to stare at the wall of rock right in front of him, and he doesn't know whether he can climb up the ladder or not. But he manages to put his foot on the first rung of the ladder and gropes around for help, "I do believe! Help me in my unbelief!"

His words are shouted out with a mixture of both despair and trust – the combination of those things that often seem to characterize our own prayers when things are tough. It's not for nothing that his words are regularly quoted as an authentic and meaningful prayer when we are caught in the middle between faith and doubt, when we live in the real, but shadowy, world of *half-belief* where we are never quite sure whether we are seeing things rightly or not. Despite this, or maybe because of it, Jesus, the beloved Son on the way to His own death, rebukes the spirit, but it doesn't go quietly. It tries one more time to destroy the child, leaving the boy as if he were dead. It is not an easy exorcism. But, in Mark's words, Jesus "takes him by the hand and *raises* him", and the boy *rises- anesti*. These words are regular *resurrection* words in the New Testament. In

the very midst of this muddle, this scene of brokenness and captivity and failure and lack of faith, Mark points us toward the final conflict and the final victory towards which Jesus is walking.

In this healing story, Mark is telling us that things are now going to get much harder for Jesus and His little crew of merry men, but that God's project, God's saving project, is going to get there in the end. It will take all the resources of spiritual and physical endurance that Jesus can muster. But He will indeed climb the rock wall and complete the journey, right to the summit. He will take up His cross, be faithful to the end, and bring in the Kingdom of God.

The questions which this story poses for us are very deep and serious ones- Are we going with Jesus? Are we left muddled, confused, puzzled, and unable to do even what we used to be able to do, but which now no longer seems within our capacity? Are we facing a new turn in our own pilgrimage, our own journey of faith, and do we now need fresh reserves of spiritual strength? When faced with crises ourselves, do we know how to pray with whatever faith we have – faith like that of the father, faith rooted in prayer and fasting like Jesus told his disciples they needed? Can we at least say, "I believe! Help me in my unbelief!" And when we reach that wall which seems to challenge our way forward, can we put the first foot on the ladder, ask for help, and start to climb?

Sources:

- NT Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (2001)
- Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom. A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (2008)