

Down the mountain: Mark 9.14-29



"Some also have wished that the next way to their Father's house were here, that they might be troubled no more with either hills or mountains to go over; but the way is the way, and there's an end." John Bunyan

Jesus said to him, "If you can! Everything is possible for the one who believes." Immediately the child's father cried out, "I do believe — help my unbelief!"

Tomorrow (23rd March) will mark a year since the start of the lockdown — can you believe it? There's a national day of commemoration and Robin will be marking it in his prayers in church at 6 pm tomorrow. Looking back at last year's diary, it's hard to believe how quickly everything shut down — and how little we realized what was coming. (The phrase "sleepwalking into disaster" comes to mind.) It was so easy to think, "That kind of thing doesn't happen to People Like Us — only to other people." And yet — it did happen, and here we are, battered, saddened, but still standing, still hopeful, still trusting in God. Amazingly thankful that the NHS didn't crumple under the strain — thankful for the vaccination rollout — thankful for each other. And amazed at the new technologies we've learnt to keep us in touch with what really matters.

The disciples at this point in Mark's Gospel are a bit like we were, a year ago. We know what's going to happen — but they don't. Jesus keeps trying to warn them, but they don't get it — how could they? Up to now, it's been getting better and better — more crowds, more miracles, more needy people finding healing and wholeness through meeting Jesus — including people from the Gentile world.

Even Peter is finally getting the picture: “You are the Christ”. And then Jesus takes them up the mountain (9.1-9) to catch a glimpse of his unveiled glory, the person he really is when all the mists of uncertainty are swept away — and it’s like a foretaste of heaven.

It reminds me of the scene in the middle of the *Pilgrim’s Progress* where the pilgrims are taken up the Delectable Mountains and catch a glimpse of the Celestial City, shining in the distance. They would have been quite happy for their journey to end at that point, to climb the mountain and go straight to heaven. That’s more or less how Peter reacts on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is great, he says — let’s stay here, away from the crowds, with their incessant, impossible demands, away from all that doubt and uncertainty, up in the light where everything is clear, setting up camp in the foothills of heaven. But that isn’t how it works. The glory is real. But the way to reach it lies down the mountain, back down across the Vale of Jezreel towards Jerusalem, back down into the arguments and the uncertainties and the needy crowds. The Way is the Way — and it’s the way of the Cross.

So what does Jesus find, down at the foot of the mountain? A confused and angry crowd, wanting quick solutions and easy answers — baffled disciples — a traumatized child — and a desperate parent. (Have you noticed how many of Jesus’ encounters are with desperate parents seeking help for their children? Somehow watching someone you love going through it is even harder than going through it yourself.) The disciples were baffled because although they had cast out demons before (6.13), this time it didn’t seem to be working. It’s as if they have to keep coming back to Jesus — they can’t do it on their own.

Tom Wright in *Mark for Everyone* (SPCK 2001) puts it this way: “The disciples have turned a corner in their pilgrimage: now it’s getting harder. People today often suppose that the early years of a Christian pilgrimage are the difficult ones, and that as you go on in the Christian life it gets more straightforward. The opposite is frequently the case. Precisely when you learn to walk beside Jesus, you are given harder tasks, which will demand more courage, more spiritual energy.”

And Jesus himself seems to feel a deepened sense that things are getting harder. In the early chapters of the gospel, faith seems to be easy — just a matter of reaching out and touching Jesus’ cloak. But not for this father: faith doesn’t come easy to him, and his cry resonates with many people today: *Lord, I do believe: help my unbelief!* It’s often said that doubt isn’t the opposite of faith: the opposite of faith is certainty. Living with doubt and uncertainty, living in the cloud, is a normal part

of the Christian life.

But the one constant in this up-and-down existence is the presence of Jesus: *Suddenly, when they looked around them, they saw no-one with them any more, but **only Jesus*** (9.8). Up on the mountain, a cloud comes down, and all that's left is a voice: Don't worry, the glory's gone, but I'm still here. **Only Jesus** comes back with them, down the mountain, down to face whatever needs to be faced down there, to deal patiently with the bustle and confusion of ordinary people struggling to believe. Down to begin the journey to Jerusalem, the way that leads to the cross — and out the other side, to the glory of Easter. **Only Jesus** — from the heights to the depths, from the glory to the darkness and back again, through doubt and confusion and out again to the light on the other side.

As the rain hides the stars, as the autumn mist hides the hills, as the clouds veil the blue of the sky, so the dark happenings of my lot hide the shining of their face from me. Yet, if I may hold their hand in the darkness, it is enough. Since I know that, though I may stumble in my going, thou dost not fall. [Alistair Maclean, Hebridean Altars]

God bless,
Loveday

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