

HIW 16.10.2011

Gospel reading: St. Mark ch. 9, vv. 17-27

Verses 22-24: “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” – “If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

I understand that modern translations of the Bible are necessary. There are two aspects to this: the first is that the old translations need to be corrected where modern linguistic research has shown that the original text does not mean what it had been thought to mean in the past. The second is the fact that the old language is not easily understandable to the modern reader, and so becomes a barrier between the people of today and the word of God, which, like the Water of Life that Jesus offers us, should be freely available to all who seek it. I can understand that; but loving language as I do, I can equally see arguments on the other side. For example: in English at least, there are so many different translations today that even church people, even committed believers, lack forms of words that everybody shares, and as a result, important Bible quotations are no longer instantly recognisable.

Imagine you are organising a Bible quiz for some church festivity. You tell the story from this morning’s Gospel down to the point where Jesus says: “Everything is possible for him who believes.” And then you come to the quiz question, which is: What does the father reply? Assuming anyone was able to answer at all, I am quite sure they would not do so with the version we have heard today: “Help me overcome my unbelief!” Rather, they would offer the more concise, more concentrated words of the King James Bible, in the English of the seventeenth century: “Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief!”

I like that version better. Not just because, as I have been reassured by a friend who taught Greek, there is no word in the Greek original that corresponds to the “overcome” – “help me overcome my unbelief” – in the modern English version, so that the old translation is nearer to the original. But also because I feel there is meaning in the old translation that is lost in the modern version.

Firstly, we have lost the “thou” – “Help thou mine unbelief”. There is an emphasis on Jesus which is lacking in the modern version: I would render it into modern English as “*You* must help...”; there is no-one else who is able to do it. And secondly: “overcome my unbelief” suggests: get rid of my unbelief, do away with it, destroy it, so that unbelief is no longer there, but only belief. The old translation gives me quite a different feeling. “I believe: help thou mine unbelief”: in this desperate cry from the desperate father, belief and unbelief exist side by side. I believe in the middle of all my unbelief; but in the presence of Jesus I can put my unbelief in his care. “Cast your burden upon the Lord” [Ps 55,22]: place your unbelief in his hands and he will take care of it, as he will take care of your sins, your sorrows, your griefs; all the things that weigh you down, that trouble your peace of mind. This will not free your life of difficulties and burdens; but it will enable you to live in strength and fulfilment in spite of them, or even to draw strength from them: going through the vale of misery you can use it for a well, as the Psalmist says; its pools are filled with water [Ps 84, 7].

In considering this story from St. Mark’s Gospel I am not going to go into the question of what we are to make of the concept of possession by evil spirits, and whether or not the boy was simply an epileptic, with a purely physical condition. It is perfectly possible that the father had had plenty of experience of doctors over the years during which he had struggled with his son’s illness. Only a few chapters earlier in his Gospel, St. Mark tells us of the woman with the haemorrhage, or the “issue of blood”, as the old translation calls it: “She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had” [Mk 5, 26]. Apparently the tendency to place one’s faith in doctors and to spend all that one has on them is not such a recent phenomenon as we might think. But the father in our story seems to have come to the same conclusion as the doctor in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”, who observes Lady Macbeth as she sleepwalks: “More needs she the divine than the physician,” that is to say, “She needs a priest more than a doctor.” Even today it requires great skill and great insight to identify the dividing line between physical and mental or spiritual sickness.

However, it is not the nature of the boy's condition that is important here, but its impact upon the people around him. We have a sick boy and a desperate father, a family in crisis. It is not only for the boy's sake that the father is seeking help, but for his own, for the family's, as well: "Take pity on us and help us," he cries out, not "help him". And so it is not the boy's belief that is put to the question, but the father's. Or is it even only that? The father's words to Jesus, "If you can do anything", imply that he doubts whether Jesus has the necessary power or ability; while Jesus' answer - "If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes" – almost seems to indicate that Jesus himself perceives the situation as a challenge to his own faith in his Heavenly Father. After all, the father is not seeking to heal his son himself, through the power of his own faith, but is calling on the power of Jesus – if *you* can do anything. The disciples have already failed. Did they not believe enough? Or did the father not believe enough in them? In the moment when he turns to Jesus himself, as the last and only remaining hope, Jesus' response challenges him to realise that it is not enough merely to rely on help coming from outside. He himself is called upon to make the leap of faith, and it is a community of belief between Jesus and the father, and probably the boy as well (since he is after all very much present in the scene, even though he is not reported to have said anything) – a community of belief between those involved that makes the impossible possible, and changes lives – the boy's life, his own life, the lives of the whole family.

This scene, and the attitude displayed by the father of the sick boy, is in sharp contrast to another attitude that appears several times in the Gospels, for example [in St. Matthew, Chapter 12, v 38]: "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.'" The thing I find most disconcerting about this request is its complete lack of relevant context. The Pharisees are not asking Jesus to use his power to any good purpose, for any relief of suffering; there is no epileptic boy, no distressed father in sight, no emotion or distress of any kind that demands sympathy: they seem to be purely in pursuit of entertainment. It is as if they were talking to Uri

Geller and saying “Please bend this spoon.” Small wonder that Jesus does not oblige them. The challenge to Jesus to display his powers does come again, however, in a more dramatic and emotion-laden context, as Jesus hangs on the cross: “Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” [Mk 15, 32]. There is no belief in unbelief here, nor any unbelief in belief, but unbelief pure and simple: “that we may see and believe” simply does not ring true. The mocking onlookers were certainly not expecting Jesus to come down from the cross; nor, equally certainly, were they hoping he would. In this, their attitude is quite contrary to that of the father of the possessed boy, who places all his hopes in the possibility, which he hardly *dares to believe* – that is another way of interpreting his exclamation – he hardly dares to believe that what he has heard about, and what he imagines in his heart, may really be so.

One thing that is lacking among those who challenge Jesus to “give a sign” and *make* them believe is any feeling of real contact with Jesus, any relationship, any engagement with him. Another thing that is lacking is any feeling of need. The father comes to Jesus in a state of profound need. He is fully aware of his own helplessness; that the world is out of his control. He sees before him one who, it seems, is a source of power beyond everything he knows, one who will be able to say, as St. John reports of Jesus, “Take heart! I have overcome the world” [John 16, 33]. And he has, perhaps, an obscure feeling that overcoming the world is performed, in some incomprehensible way, through love. He has, perhaps, an obscure, inarticulate sense that this Jesus of Nazareth is one who loves the world, and so loves his son, as he himself, the father, loves him, ill or possessed as he is. But he also realises that love is a two-way process, and that something is required from him as well if that love is to bear fruit, if he and his son are to be given what they so desperately desire. “Everything is possible for him who believes”: would it be so much different if Jesus had said to him “Everything is possible for him who loves”, and the father had replied “Lord, I love; help me to overcome my unlovingness”?

Because what do we mean when we say “I believe”? It can mean two quite different things. “I believe in fairies”, or “I believe in Father Christmas”, is one thing. “I believe in my wife” is something quite different. In the first case, it is a question as to whether the thing exists at all. However much we may regret the fact, belief in fairies and belief in Father Christmas is something that generally only survives a few years of human existence, before having to yield to incontrovertible experience. But when I say “I believe in my wife”, it is not a matter of believing in her existence. I don’t need any proof of that – there she is, sitting in full view of me now, of course she exists. I believe in her in a different way. I believe in her integrity, in all the qualities of her character, and above all in her reliability, that she will stand by me whatever happens. I trust her, I have complete confidence in her; and even if reports were to reach my ears of anything to her discredit – I can’t imagine that that could ever be the case, but even if it were – my belief, my confidence in her would be strong enough to overcome it. And no doubt that would be the case in the other direction too.

Belief in God embraces both of these kinds of belief. Firstly there is the belief that God exists at all; and secondly there is belief in Him in the sense of trust in Him, an unshakable confidence in his loving care, that “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” [Ps 23, 6]. It is truly remarkable that, whatever the case may be in individual lives, for humanity as a whole this belief in God has survived for century after century, despite the fact that we cannot perceive God as I can perceive my wife sitting down there, and despite what many people consider to be overwhelming, or at least very strong, evidence in the other direction. Why is that so? I come back to the desperate father and his cry, “I do believe; you must help my unbelief.” I do not think there are many of us who have not thought that, who have not prayed that, at some time, or at many times, in the course of our lives. The phenomenon of belief in unbelief, of continuing to believe, to have confidence and trust, even when the sky is darkest and the outlook is grimmest, occupies a very deep place in many of our souls.

Belief in unbelief, or unbelief in belief; which of the two elements is stronger, or dominant, may vary from person to person; but is the person who considers himself an unbeliever, and yet finds himself at a time of crisis crying out, “God, if you exist, then please...,” very far removed from the father in our story? If, as I have suggested, belief and love are closely related concepts, then the feeling of a relationship in love can outweigh the most considered belief or unbelief. – When my wife and I were talking about this text in preparation for today, the name of Heinz Zahrnt came up, that grand old man of German Protestant theology, now alas no longer with us, whose lectures at the Kirchentag we never missed as long as he was giving them. I cannot say that all his views coincided with mine; but I remember one moment when my heart really went out to him. After he had tried to explain in theological terms why his concept of God no longer allowed him to believe that there was any point in petitionary prayer – asking God to do anything –, in response to a question he found himself forced to admit, in an almost apologetic tone: “When my wife was ill I prayed for her.” It seems to me that when he did that, he had reached a point at which the impulse of love took over from his considered theological viewpoint.

No-one can be forced into belief. Faith may be, as Margot Kässmann says, a gift, the gift of grace; but it is a gift that no-one can be forced to accept. When we make that “leap of faith” and say “I believe” despite our unbelief, we are making a choice, a decision. It is not a rational, but an emotional decision: I don’t think the father weighed the pros and cons of belief and unbelief before he decided to place his bets on Jesus. It was something that came to him; but was a decision nevertheless. The father might well have said to Jesus, “Lord, I want to believe.” The doctors may have failed him; even Jesus’ disciples had failed him. But whatever it was that shone out from Jesus – and again, I imagine it was love, rather than power - won him over.

We say that faith can move mountains. As far as I know there is no recorded example of this ever having physically happened. But even many doctors would accept that faith can heal sickness; and even though most of the

physically impaired people who make pilgrimages to places like Lourdes return in the same physical condition as they went in, there are the few exceptions who experience physical healing that even the most careful and most sceptical investigation fails to explain. But more to the point: who knows how many people who set out on a spiritual journey return home with the mountains removed that weighed upon their souls. Mountains of guilt, mountains of inadequacy, mountains of despair. Lives that were in danger of being destroyed, of being thrown into the fire or the water, become worth living again. The child, or the adult, in the grip of disability or suffering learns that his or her life is just as precious before God as that of anyone else. The fallen feel Jesus take them by the hand and lift them to their feet; and learn that even belief in unbelief is acceptable to the Lord.