

"Down to Earth Faith"

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 2 November 2003 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Mark 9:14-42
<u>Reading</u>	Mark 9:14-42
<u>Hymns</u>	400, 133 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	423, 457, 436, 570 from Mission Praise 89 from The Source
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

Have you ever had a mountain top experience and then come down to earth with a bump!!!?

I guess it happens to all of us some time in our life
and to some of us many, many times.
Climax and anti-climax are a part of every day experience.

We build ourselves up for an event,
a celebration
or an interview
It goes really well and we come home on a high.
But in the morning,
the mundanity of ordinary everyday life
with its persistent problems,
chronic concerns,
regular routines
and mind-numbing boredom,
hits you like a wall of fog.

Life on this planet can be full of the most exciting events,
magic moments
and awesome adventures,
but it can also be dogged by continuous calamity,
serial suffering
or the sheer slog of daily existence,
fighting against the odds.

We know this,
because we live here,
and that is the way of the world which we have to cope with every day.

This is reality.
Interestingly,
and to those of us who believe, unsurprisingly,
the Bible portrays exactly such a life –
It accords with reality,
which is one of the reasons why we believe it.

Jesus himself,
God though he was,
experienced in his manhood the same life here on earth as we do.

Just take a look at the scenario, laid out before us in this evening's portion.

Jesus and the famous three had just experienced the glory of God
as he had been transfigured on the mountaintop
before the eyes of His closest and most trusted henchman.
But as they came down,
glowing with excitement,
they find the nine also-rans facing a failure of faith and religious hostility too.
While the big men had been up the mountain on a jolly,
the little men had been left to run the show and failed.

A distraught father,
at the end of his tether,
had brought his son for healing
and the nine could not muster up enough power between them
to exorcise the spirit –
leaving them wide open to derision from the people
and antagonism from the authorities.

Jesus reads the situation in seconds
and with all the authority of the Master,
takes control.

Frustrated by the feeble attempts of his failing students,
his irritated outburst -
“Oh unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?
How long shall I put up with you?
Bring the boy to me!” *(Mark 9:19)*
reminds me of my Father.

When my brother Steve and I were teenagers,
learning butchery in my father's shop;
We would struggle with a large piece of prime beef,
vainly trying to extract a large bone without leaving most of the meat
still attached to it.
Seeing our predicament,
Father would thrust us out of the way with great exasperation,
and with a sharp knife,

a flick of the wrist
and a flurry of movement remove the offending bone,
clean as a whistle,
leaving us totally frustrated, with a deep sense of failure.

One can imagine that that is how the disciples must have felt.

Not so long ago,

these very same disciples had returned from a mission during which, according
to **Mark 6:13**,

‘they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil
and healed them’.

Why success then and failure now?

Before we attempt to answer that question

let’s turn our attention to the father of the boy.

He had come to the disciples hoping and praying for a miracle,

but he had not received one.

He had believed that the disciples had the power to heal his son,

but his expectations were not realised.

I wonder how often we have been let down by those whom we believed would be able
to help us

only to find that at our very point of need they were powerless to help.

Now please don’t misunderstand me here.

It is right and proper to turn to God’s people in your time of need.

There should be and there are those in our/your church who will always be
available to support us/you in times of need.

But none of us is God.

We all have our limitations.

And so it was here.

On this occasion they were powerless to help

and in his extremity the father was forced to turn to Christ himself,

for only he has the real power.

The man wanted to believe .

He wanted to trust.

He longed to find someone who was worthy to accept his abiding faith.

“I do believe”, he says, “Help me to overcome my unbelief.”

Faith is a precarious thing and it is necessary from time to time to be reminded just
where that faith must lie.

If we put our faith in our fellow Christians;

If we put our faith in the church;

If we put our faith in our church leaders;

If we put our faith, as many do in Faith itself;

Sooner or later we will be disappointed.

There can be only one subject of our faith and that is God alone.

Everything else will fail us in the end.

And so it is Christ himself who casts the demon out of the boy.
And Christ who restores the boy to his father.

Later when the crowds have gone and they are alone the disciples ask their Lord:
What went wrong?
Why couldn't we do it?

I love this homely touch.
It is so typically human.
If it were today, we'd come home flop down in a chair and say
"Phew that was a bit of a day – Where did we go wrong?"

Jesus answer is simple and to the point.

No criticism.
No recriminations.
No reprimand.
Just a statement, "This kind can only come out by prayer."

Some bibles have "by prayer and fasting",
but apparently some of the ancient manuscripts do not include "fasting".
Fasting was closely associated with prayer in the Jewish mind in Jesus' day,
because the Pharisees always fasted twice a week and made a show of their
prayers and fasts in public.
But Jesus never subscribed to their practice
and presumably stuck to that required by the two or three religious festivals
each year which included fasting.

So was Jesus accusing the nine disciples of trying to cast out the demon without the
use of prayer?

Maybe he was.
And are we to assume from Jesus words,
that if they *had* prayed,
they would have been successful.
We will never know.
But one thing is certain.
The power is not in the prayer,
but in the One to whom the prayer is directed.

Clearly Jesus is saying that if we are to do works of power in His Name,
then we must acknowledge,
both in words, thought and practice
that we are utterly dependent on God for the power to do such things
and indeed the power to achieve any and all spiritual goals.

The power is not ours but His.
And if we fail to understand that
we shall fail.

We are at our best when we are his humble servants.

This idea is reinforced as Jesus takes his disciples away from the crowds to teach them.

He spoke of his own mission -

One of humble submission to His Father's will
that he would be betrayed by men,
killed by men
and raised again on the third day.
But they didn't understand
and they didn't ask.

Indeed so little did they understand it
that as they walked along the road,
strung out in a line with Jesus out in front on his own
in the manner of the Rabbis of the day,
they argued at the back as to which of them was the greatest.

This reminds me of someone I know who finally managed to convince his girlfriend that he was the more intelligent of the two.

The relationship did not survive the victory.

And so we have the greatest lesson in our passage.

Indeed, I believe that this is Jesus' greatest teaching.

Jesus taught a lot of things.

He taught that we should love one another;
That we should love our neighbour as ourselves;
That we should do to others that we should be done unto;
And that we should love our enemies and turn the other cheek.

All of these,
anybody who knows anything about Jesus
will reel off to you as Jesus' teachings.

But *this* one they choose to forget,
yet he taught it more times than all the others put together.

"If any one wants to be first, he must be the very last,
and be the servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

This is the hardest lesson we will ever have to learn.

Everything in us cries out to be first.

To be top of the class;
To be competitive
To win;
We want to be in control;
We want to be boss;
We want to be God.

In Christianity, God's servants are granted the status of sons
But in New Age thinking we become gods ourselves.

It is the great temptation.

Way back in the Garden of Eden,

Satan tempted Eve with words “.. you shall be as gods ...” -
and as the television tells us every day,
both implicitly and explicitly
“because you’re worth it”,
we fall for it time and time again.

But if you want to be loved, you must love.

If you want to be served, you must serve.

And if you want to be great, you must be lowly.

We come to God as children,

expecting nothing but love,

forgiveness

and security

and we receive so much more.

And we bring others to him in the same humility

ushering them into his arms for his blessing,

and if we hinder that process and cause such a one to stumble and fall

because of our wretched pride

and so-called spirituality

(the humbug of our own self-righteousness)

then it would be better if we were dead.

Perhaps it was this thought which prompted John in verse 38 (*Mark 9:38*) to tell Jesus that they had forbidden another man to cast out demon’s in the name of Christ,

‘because he was not one of us’.

And Jesus has to instruct him

that he who is not against us is for us.

We may think that we are the chosen ones and so we are,

but there are many others who serve the same Lord

and it is to him they answer, not to us.

So as we draw together the somewhat disparate strands that we find in this particular portion of God’s word,

on a day when we are still reeling

from the loss of one of this church’s ‘back-room boys’;

for one of Dave Green’s particular qualities was that he was always willing to help out,

however menial the task,

without complaint

and without thanks.

How down to earth is our faith,

and in whom is it founded?

Last week I was talking to Betty about Job.

I mean the Job of the Bible
and you will find his long and tortuous story in the middle of your bibles.

God allows Job to suffer terribly.

He loses everything he has,
but he refuses to curse God.

His three friends come round and blame him.

They reason that God must be punishing him for his sins.
But throughout the book,
Job maintains his righteousness.

He says, "I haven't done anything wrong.

I'm a righteous man."

"Just let God come and see me face to face
and I'll prove to him that I am a good guy
and I demand to know why he has treated me so dreadfully."

Then, right at the end of the book God speaks to Job out of a storm and says,

"Who is this that darkens my counsel without knowledge?
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
Tell me if you understand." *(Job 38:1-4)*

And finally, Job answers God and says,

"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.
Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" *(Job: 42:1-6)*

It is not God's intent that we should all pass the way of Job.

He was unique.

But each of us has to come to that point
where we simply acknowledge that God is God.

It is in Him our faith lies.

Any power we have is His.

Tomorrow we face a world of people who have been brainwashed into thinking that they are number one.

Who have been taught that their own ideas are their morality.
Their destiny is in their own hands.
That they are gods within their own little kingdom.

Will you be one of them?

Or will you live by faith in the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
Knowing that your faith,
your power
and your destiny
is in Christ and in Christ alone.

May it be so.

Amen