

Among portraits of Christ that artists have painted over the centuries, relatively few have shown him angry or impatient with people. We ourselves tend to picture him that way, perhaps, only in such scenes as when he made a whip and drove the money-changers from the temple precincts. For us to understand and apply today's Gospel however, we must focus on the moment when suddenly from Jesus burst forth the words:

*“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”*

For while our Lord may well be including in the address, “*O faithless generation,*” the unbelief that he finds in people wherever he goes, in this text he is rather obviously aiming his accusation at his own disciples.

Now this fact should give us pause. If his own disciples have been out working in the world under his commission, attempting (among other things) to expel demons, how on earth can he charge them with lack of faith? Nevertheless, this clearly constitutes his complaint against them. The reason it should give us pause, moreover, is the likelihood that we may fall into the same error.

As you well know, much earlier in his ministry Jesus gave to twelve of his followers a special commission. Out of the many who had come to him and were traveling with him, these twelve would learn from him in order to go forth in his name. The text reads:

*He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.*

This is one of the most famous hallmarks of our Lord's ministry: his selection and commission of envoys to go out and do what he himself was doing – to proclaim the Kingdom in both mighty word and powerful deed.

Now, in his letter to the Corinthians Paul can state that the apostolic office has made him and others *God's fellow workers*. But Paul also makes one thing clear: One of us may plant the garden, but only God makes it turn into a garden. We may plant the seed, but God alone makes the plant grow. And though we may lay on bricks, Christ lets us know how it really

take place when he says, *“I will build my church.”*

This, then, seems to be what has gone wrong in Mark 9: Confident in their office and the authority the Lord has bestowed on them, the disciples have begun imagining that they are working the wonders. They have most likely started to think that the name of Jesus is a kind of magic formula, a spiritual charm that they can speak. If, indeed, this has been their mistake, then sooner or later they shall learn the hard way that a handful of well-intentioned men are no match for the forces of Satan. And this is exactly what they find out. The poor man’s father gives the final score on Disciples Versus Unclean Spirit:

*“I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”*

As I stated in last week’s sermon, the time in which we live, the years between Christ’s Ascension and his Return to Judge – the “Time of the Church” – is really the Earthly Ministry of Christ, Part II. He is not absent but working in us and through us. Yet it is easy for any of us who labors in the church today to act as if our Lord did leave us 2,000 years ago, and now it’s time to show what we can do.

Now, it is perfectly possible to build a human organization with the powers we have, even an organization that looks & sounds like a church. But the real church is where Christ Jesus with his own power & authority takes on the power of the devil, when the Lord himself breaks the hearts of the impenitent, and works genuine healing in the souls of those tormented by sins of the past. In the real church men who were enemies are reconciled in the Spirit. Young people find the courage no longer to conform to this world, but to be transformed into offering themselves to God as a living sacrifice. But you & I cannot work these changes in ourselves or each other. We can hold meetings and form groups. Only the Son of God can transform us into his holy Body.

In the structure of Mark’s Gospel, the location of today’s reading is quite significant. Right before this exorcism occurs, Jesus takes three disciples up onto the mountain to witness his Transfiguration. As Christ stands beside such great men of God as Elijah and Moses, he is changed into a blaze of glory, and from the sky the Father declares of him alone: *“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”*

Then, immediately after today’s incident with the demon possessed man, our Lord for the

first time tells his disciples of the mission that only he, by himself, can fulfill:

*“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”*

Moses was a servant of the Lord, often faithful but always a sinner, with hours of great faith and moments of weakness. Elijah, servant of the Lord, was much the same. Of all men to appear on the earth, only Jesus was and is the Lord. So it was that, when the day came for someone, as the early Eucharistic prayer preserved by Hippolytus reads, to...

*...abolish death, break the bonds of the adversary, tread Hades underfoot, [and] give light to the righteous,*

no one on earth was worthy to go forth but Jesus the Son of God.

Being coworkers of his does not make us equal to him. Working in his church does not mean that we build it. We may tell others the Gospel, but only he can convert their hearts and minds. All that we set out to do, therefore, we must do in faith – by which in today’s text Christ means realizing our own utter weakness and trusting totally in his power to accomplish whatever good is needed.

Finally, what is the indicator that our hearts are in the right place? What shows that we understand how powerless we are and how fully we depend on the Lord? The best indicator, as our Lord himself says in the last line of today’s Gospel, is that God finds us praying. He does not mean “going through the formality of prayer,” but praying humbly from the heart to the God we believe is here, praying earnestly to the Christ we believe is living and ruling right here among us.

How often do we casually walk into church, look around at who is here, and not remember that the chief reason ever to attend the Divine Service is the promise of Christ that he will be here to help us? How often does a preacher worry about having his sermon ready, and how often do people judge a sermon, forgetting that the main thing is that through him the voice of Christ must be what is heard?

How often do people at a church meeting pass through the brief formality of praying in Jesus’ name, and then behave in that meeting as if the Church were their thing to run? How often do churches wait to receive a pastor believing that everything depends on his style and

personality?

In the midst of all the tasks that you and I undertake in congregational life, above all else we must be men and women of faith in the living presence and the power of Christ Jesus himself to defend & teach, to build & unite his Church. We must understand that when it comes to the real business of the church – which is offering sinners the forgiveness of God, helping each other to live lives of love each day, and reminding each other of our hope for life in the world to come – that in this business the opposition is much stronger than we are.

But he has been defeated by the Lamb of God , the war has been won, and all we need do is pray to the Lord and follow him. ✠