

8 September 2024

MIRACLES, MUSTARD SEEDS, & MISPLACED FAITH

1. INTRO

- A. I want to start this morning with a audience participation. I really liked Peter's word cloud a few weeks back, and I wanted to try something slightly different. Peter asked us how we would describe Hope City Church and we got some really interesting and helpful responses.
- B. This morning, I'd like to ask you simply to finish a sentence: 'I like to think of Jesus as _____. Just a word, or maybe a few words. 'I like to think of Jesus as _____'.
 - i. We've been in Matthew's Gospel for quite awhile now, and in this time we've seen Jesus gradually revealing who he is, and what he plans to do.
 - ii. It's a slow rollout. Biblical scholars reckon that from Jesus' baptism till where we are just now in the story takes place over the span of about three years. Over that time, the disciples had seen all sorts of miracles and an immense wealth of teaching—can you imagine being able to follow Jesus around for three years?
 - iii. But it's only in the passages we've studied in the past few weeks that Jesus has revealed where his mission on earth was heading: he was going to Jerusalem, where he was going to die and rise again in three days.
 - iv. Then, last week we saw Jesus bringing just a few of his disciples up to the top of a mountain where they all experience this Transfiguration, a dramatic revealing of who Jesus is. But our passage today is going to focus on what's happening on the ground while Jesus and the disciples are up on the mountain. Let's listen as Jonny/David read our passage for us.

14 When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 15 "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. 16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

17 "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." 18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." [21]

22 When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. 23 They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

- C. This is such an odd transition to the story. We've gone from Jesus revealing the full splendour of his divine power to the group on the mountain, to what the rest of the disciples were up to back on the ground. Let's look at how the story unfolds

2. A FATHER'S FAITH

- A. Matthew keeps us with Jesus and his trio of disciples who went up the mountain with him, Peter, James, and John. Our passage starts with them walking down the side of the mountain, and they can see that a crowd has formed around the other disciples. This isn't exactly out of the ordinary, Jesus has attracted crowds in the thousands at this point, so it's plausible that his disciples would be recognizable to people passing by.
- B. No sooner do they arrive than a man rushes up to Jesus and **kneels** before him.
 - i. This might not seem all that noteworthy to us, but Matthew is trying to signal something here. Joe Kapolyo writes that the father 'approached Jesus reverentially and knelt down. In that culture, kneeling before someone symbolised respect and, often, pleading.'¹
 - ii. What does this tell us? This is a desperate man. This is someone who would do just about anything to see his child made well. He's brought him to Jesus' disciples, but they weren't able to heal him...more about that later.

3. THE SON'S CONDITION

- A. What's happening to this young boy? He's having seizures, he's suffering greatly. At this point, you might be thinking, 'I know people who have seizures'.
 - i. And it's true, I think most of us will probably know or have known people who have had conditions like epilepsy, where they experience occasional seizures where they momentarily lose control of their bodies. It can be a scary thing to encounter, both for the person and those around them, especially the first time it happens.
 - ii. But the passage goes further, the boy's father says that he often falls into fire and water. This should clue us in to the reality that this isn't epilepsy in and of itself, there is something here trying to harm this boy. And if we

¹ Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew" in *Africa Bible Commentary* ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Zondervan Academic, 2006), 1171.

skip down to verse 18, we see that it is a demon behind this boy's suffering.

- B. I think sometimes the intersection of the Bible, science, and the spiritual world can feel like a bit of a minefield. It's certainly an area where we should demonstrate caution, but I think it's worth taking a moment to make a few observations here.
- i. First, some of this boy's symptoms do indeed present like epilepsy. *However*, and this is a big however, as I said before, the wider set of symptoms suggest something more sinister. He's falling into water and fire. This isn't just epilepsy.
 - ii. Second, it's important to note that not everyone in the ancient world viewed epileptic seizures as demonic activity.
 1. *Hippocrates of Kos, the 'Hippocratic oath' guy, lived and worked several centuries before the birth of Jesus, and he questioned religious priests who wanted to ascribe supernatural origins to seizures. In his work, The Sacred Disease, he studied epilepsy and seizures, and he was particularly concerned that the contemporary religious healers in his era were inventing spiritual origins for a natural disease. He wrote that epilepsy 'is not in my opinion more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a nature and a cause. But humans have considered it a divine thing through their inexperience and their wonder at its peculiar character.'* *Hippocrates doesn't mince his words against these religious figures, writing that those 'who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians, purifiers, charlatans and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge.'*²
 - a. *When we read this story we may be tempted to think that Jesus and his disciples are making the mistake of attributing a physical disease to demon possession. An article I found on the American Humanist Association's website suggests that the New Testament attributes 'blindness, muteness, lameness, epilepsy, and insanity' to demons.*³
 - b. *But, is this a good reading of either the ancient world or the text of the New Testament? I don't think so. People in the ancient world could recognize seizures, they could recognize demon possession, and there is good evidence to see that the two weren't always conflated, or mistaken for one another.*
 - c. *I found a helpful article that looked at the legacy of Hippocrates position on seizures, and the concluding*

² Hippocrates, *The Sacred Disease*, I-II. in *Hippocrates* trans. W. H. S. Jones, Vol. 2 (Harvard University Press, 1923), 139-141.

³ Joseph C. Sommer, 'Some Reasons Why Humanists Reject the Bible' <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/reasons-humanists-reject-bible/> [Accessed 3 September 2024].

paragraph begins by stating that ‘although Hippocratic physicians used arguments to oppose religious views about epilepsy, it is clear that they were careful not to oppose religion itself.’⁴ In other words, people in the ancient world could both be religious and believe in natural causes for medical conditions.

- d. *Finally, we can find the same sort of perspective in the Bible itself! Look at Matthew 4:24, Matthew gives us a list of the sort of people who are being healed by Jesus: ‘those with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed.’ Did you catch it? Matthew himself draws a line of distinction between people having seizures and being possessed by demons!*
- iii. I think we can safely conclude, therefore, that the key individuals in our passage this morning were all on the same page that this wasn’t a case of epilepsy that needed healing, but a demon that needed expelling. But before we get to that, pay attention to Jesus’ reply.

4. JESUS’ HARSH WORDS?

- A. He says, ‘You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?’
 - i. How does this square with the peaceful, tranquil, quasi-hippie Jesus that we’ve imagined? He sounds exasperated, fed-up, dare I say, mad?
 - ii. Do you have room in your theology for an exasperated Jesus? A frustrated Jesus? He’s issuing a rebuke here, and a pretty strong one—but who is he rebuking, and why?
 - 1. *We have a few options: is he rebuking the boy’s father, the disciples, or perhaps the wider crowd that has gathered?*
 - a. *To me it seems unlikely that he’s got the boy’s father in mind, he’s not done anything in this passage to suggest that he has a rebuke coming to him.*
 - b. *The disciples, on the other hand, seem to fit the frame much more clearly—there was an issue with their faith, as we’ll see later in verse 20. The word for unbelieving that Jesus uses here, ‘apistos’, literally means ‘without faith’.*
 - c. *There is also the possibility that this is directed toward people in the wider crowd. Mark 9 does tell us that some of the Jewish religious elite were among the crowd. But, as Matthew doesn’t spell this out, it seems unlikely that he’s trying to steer us in this direction.*

⁴ Donald Todman, ‘Epilepsy in the Graeco-Roman World: Hippocratic Medicine and Asklepiian Temple Medicine Compared’, *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences: Basic and Clinical Perspectives* Vol. 17, No. 4, 440.

- d. *I think, on balance, it makes the most sense if his rebuke is directed at least primarily toward the disciples, because later on in the passage he directly tells them they need to have faith, and he uses the same word, pistis. But we'll get there in a moment.*

5. THE EXORCISM

- A. Jesus' rebuke is a quick one, and he then sets out on the task at hand—driving the demon out of the boy.
- i. Exorcisms have had a bit of a renaissance over the last 50 or so years, probably tied to the release of the movie conveniently called *The Exorcist*. What's interesting is that the depictions of exorcisms in films, including *The Exorcist*, often involve long, drawn-out battles between priests and demons. Whether or not we enjoy this genre of film, notice how different this is from how Matthew describes Jesus performing an exorcism.
 - ii. It gets exactly one verse, verse 18. 'Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.' It wouldn't exactly make for a particularly long movie...or even a short film. There isn't a back and forth, a big colossal battle between the forces of good and evil. The demon doesn't stand a chance because Jesus tells it to get lost, and it's gone and the boy is healed.
 - iii. But the story doesn't end here. In fact, I think it's just getting started...you see, *I don't think this passage is really about the exorcism.*

6. THE DISCIPLES' FAITH

- A. Why do I think isn't the story really about the exorcism? Well, look what happens next. We can visualize Jesus and his disciples walking away from the crowd, along the road and into the wilderness. At last, it's just them together, and they lean in and say to Jesus, 'Hey Jesus, why couldn't we drive that demon out?'
- B. On the surface, it's a fair question. Back in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus commissioned and sent out the disciples with a list of commands. Listen to what he said in verses 7-8: 'As you go, proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.'
- i. Now, Matthew doesn't tell us whether they had any success in demon expelling, but the parallel passage in Mark does say that "They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them."⁵
 - ii. On that basis, I think we can safely say that the disciples *had* been able to drive out demons previously. Furthermore, they seem a bit surprised and embarrassed about not being able to drive the demons out, why else

⁵ Mark 6:13

would they wait until they'd got Jesus alone, away from the crowds. 'Why couldn't we drive it out?'

- C. Jesus' reply touches on what he'd said earlier. He says it's because they have so little faith. He uses a word that only occurs once in the Bible, *oligopistia*, basically it's a mashup of the Greek words for small and faith. Notice that he's not using the same term he used earlier, *apistia*, which means without faith or faithless. He recognizes that they have faith, but it's not fully-formed, it's not mature.
- i. Then he moves into an analogy to help them understand. He says that if they were to have a faith as small as a mustard seed, they could move mountains.
 - ii. I don't know if you've ever seen a mustard seed. I'm about as non-rural as they come, I couldn't tell you what sort of plant would produce mustard seeds. I have, however, bought mustard, and I know that some fancy mustards out there still have some of the seeds still in the jar. I've got one here if you want to look at it later on. The seeds are small, you wouldn't notice it if one of them was on the floor in front of you.
 1. *The commentator William Barclay notes that Jesus was using a common Jewish rhetorical device here. He writes 'a great teacher, who could really expound and interpret Scripture and who could explain and resolve difficulties, was regularly known as an uprooter, or even a pulveriser, of mountains. To tear up, to uproot, to pulverise mountains were all regular phrases for removing difficulties.'*⁶
 2. *So there's a verbal element here, moving mountains is a common phrase for powerful command of speech. We've got these as well. How about something like 'the singing this morning really raised the roof'? This makes sense to the British people in the room, but if you were translating it into another language and the person wasn't familiar with the idiom, they might not understand.*
 - a. *Jesus is obviously being metaphorical here. If faithful followers of Jesus could actually rearrange landscapes, the Keswick Convention in the Peak District would have probably been in the news by now!*
 3. *What Jesus seems to be saying is that the **size** of an individual's faith isn't the important factor, it's **who** they've put that faith in. God, who has limitless power, can work profound incredible acts through something as small as a mustard seed.*

7. A FAITH MISPLACED?

⁶ William Barclay, *Matthew* Vol. 2 (St Andrew Press, 2013), 195.

- A. So what's wrong with the disciples faith? I think this whole story seems to mirror what we've seen over the past few Sundays. About a month ago, we looked at the scene where Jesus finally reveals to the disciples that he's the Son of God, the promised Messiah, and that his mission is going to lead him to a cross in Jerusalem. Peter tries to brush off that last part, he doesn't want Jesus to die, he wants Jesus to fix the world, to restore God's people to their rightful place. And Jesus famously rebukes him.
- i. Now, we've had Jesus once again revealing more about his divine nature and his mission to a few of the disciples at the Transfiguration, but the others aren't with them, they're at the foot of the mountain, failing to carry out an exorcism.
 - ii. We've already seen that they were most likely able to perform them before. I think, in light of what Jesus says with regard to their little faith, that the best conclusion here is that the disciples on the ground, who weren't present with Jesus at the Transfiguration, have not fully clocked a proper understanding of Jesus' mission.
 1. *I think they're where Peter was in Chapter 16. They have faith in Jesus, but a Jesus of their own desires.*
 - iii. Part of the reason I think this is the likely explanation is because of the verses that immediately follow. Jesus essentially restates what he'd said in the previous chapter, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.'
 1. *I suspect that Jesus is reiterating this message precisely because they have failed to believe it yet again. They're trusting in him as the Messiah, but they're not yet ready to accept him on the terms that he set out for himself.*
 2. *I think they've put their trust in a swashbuckling, Roman-conquering, warrior-king. That's what the Jewish people thought the Messiah would look like, after all. But it's a fundamental misunderstanding of a few things.*
 - iv. First, it's a **misunderstanding about the Kingdom of God**. Do you remember our little mini-series on the Kingdom of God? We had a working definition, which we tried to use every week as a bit of a memory exercise: God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, and in God's timing.
 1. *The disciples' definition would probably look something like: The Messiah's physical rule, over the people of Israel, in the land God promised to Israel, by our understanding of God's plan, in the immediate future.*
 2. *Do you see how this is problematic? How presumptuous do you have to be, to hold firm to your interpretation of prophecy when the Son of God is literally standing in front of you?*
 - v. But second, and perhaps even more problematic, it's a misunderstanding of **who Jesus is**.

1. *Jesus had no intention of fulfilling Israel's expectation of a Messiah, he came to bring about the Kingdom of God in his own way, in his own timing, according to his Father's plan. He's going to do something much bigger, he's not just going to redeem Israel, he's going to transform people from every part of the world. And he won't stop until the world is fully transformed.*
 2. *Listen to how Stanley Hauerwas puts it: 'Jesus tells them again, as they gather in Galilee, that the Son of Man will be betrayed, killed, and yet on the third day will be raised. And, as Peter predicted, the disciples are greatly distressed by this news. Their inability to understand that Jesus will be betrayed and die is connected with their inability to cast out the demon that subjected this boy to such terrible fits. They continue to expect Jesus to triumph in a manner that will be a sign for the world. "Raised on the third day" does not yet sound like such a triumph; much less does "raised on a cross" sound like a victory. Yet that is the victory encapsulated in a mustard seed—able to move mountains.'*⁷
- vi. To follow Jesus, we first need to understand where he was going. This is something he's now told the disciples several times. But they're struggling to believe.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- A. So now I want to ask a simple question: Who is Jesus to you? The question he posed to Peter, 'Who do you say I am?', is an incredibly important question, and it's something that followers of Jesus believe that everyone will have to answer—either in this life or the next.
- B. You see, it is possible to end up following the Jesus that our culture has proclaimed. Some people think of Jesus as a kind of magical miracle worker, others like a philosopher or great orator. At the more ridiculous end, we've got the Buddy Christ from *Dogma* or Ricky Bobby addressing his prayers to 'Sweet little baby Jesus.' We've got superhero Jesus, surfer Jesus, we could go on...
- C. About fifteen years ago, an interesting book came out, it had a great title: *Jesus, Made in America*. The author is a church historian called Steve Nichols, and he has a really telling line at the beginning of the book. He's talking primarily about the Jesus of the American media, but I think it could be translated to Scotland as well. He writes, 'Jesus, like most cultural heroes, is malleable. And his given shape has much more to say about the shapers than

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 158.

it does of him. Christians in all cultures and ages have the tendency to impose their understandings and cultural expressions on Scripture or beliefs.’⁸

- D. Let’s zero in on that last line for a moment. If the Bible contains truth for all people in all times and all places, it will by its very nature bristle against some aspects of every culture. The same is true for Jesus. So let me ask a very personal diagnostic question: Do the words of Jesus challenge you? Convict you? Unsettle you?
- E. Circling back to the question I asked at the beginning of the talk, how do you think culture has shaped your idea of Jesus?
- i. Don’t go down the same path as the disciples, don’t believe in a Jesus of your own construction, who agrees with all the same presuppositions that you do. Get to know the Jesus of the Gospels. Learn from the lessons of his disciples.
 1. *What should we do instead? Look at our passage today: Rather than imposing your own agenda onto Jesus, instead you can be like the boy’s father, recognizing his own helplessness and turning to Jesus as the only one who could intervene in the situation.*
 2. *If you wouldn’t think of yourself as a follower of Christ, I wonder if part of what’s held you back is not a problem with Jesus himself but instead some aspect of a cultural presumption about Jesus. What presumptions or cultural ideas about Jesus would you say are holding you back? Would you consider getting to know the real Jesus, as the Bible describes him?*
 3. *And, if you are a follower of Christ, have you ever considered that you might prefer to worship a Jesus made in your own image? I want to put a few questions up on the screen for you to reflect on, and then Ellyn and the band are going to come up and lead us in a song that celebrates the person and work of Jesus as the Bible describes him.*
 4. *Question 1: In what ways might your faith have been shaped by cultural expectations rather than the biblical Jesus?
Question 2: Do you have room in your faith for a Jesus who sometimes unsettles or challenges you?*

⁸ Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to “The Passion of the Christ”* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), v.