

Coming down from the mountain. Bangalore, India. 26 January 2007.

I want to look with you this evening at two occasions in the gospels where the Holy Spirit links a miraculous healing with our Lord's coming down from a mountain.¹ In the one case the account of the healing followed what we call *the Sermon on the Mount*, and in the other it followed what we call *the Mount of the Transfiguration*. Our first reading is from **Matthew 7. 28-8. 4** ... then from **Mark 9. 2, 7-9, 14-29**. There are many fascinating points of contact between the two incidents recorded here – particularly when we take account of the parallel accounts of each incident as provided by the other gospels.

First, both mountains were **mountains of revelation**, where those with the Lord Jesus discovered something of His *authority*. From the close of Matthew 7, we learn, on the one hand, that His was an authority which exceeded that of the scribes – ‘when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as One having authority, and not as the scribes’, Matt. 7. 28-29 – ‘the scribes’ who relied on the supposed wisdom and teaching of the past – who droned on and on, quoting rabbi after rabbi, rattling off precedent after precedent, tradition after tradition – such as, ‘Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said ...’, ‘Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said ...’. I suspect that the teaching of the scribes added a whole new meaning to the word ‘boring’!

But, on the other hand, from the account of the Mount of the Transfiguration we learn that our Lord's authority exceeded – not only that of the scribes – but even that of Moses and Elijah – both of whom represented the line of genuine prophets of God – who, in contrast to the scribes, mounted the platform to thunder their characteristic, ‘Thus says *the Lord*’. I say ‘characteristic’ – not only because we encounter the expression some 360 times in OT – but, in particular, with my eye on how James described them in James 5. 10 – ‘Take as an example of suffering and of longsuffering, my brethren, the prophets *who spoke in the name of the Lord*’.

But *the Lord Jesus* was neither scribe nor mere prophet. He was the Son of God – and as such used neither formula – He had His own. And in marked contrast to both, He stood up and simply announced, ‘I say to you’. He affirmed, for example, in Matthew 5. 38-39, ‘You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But *I say to you* not to resist the evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also’. And it is almost impossible to exaggerate the change in tone and atmosphere between the last book of the OT and the first in the NT – from the prophecy of Malachi – in which – within the space of just four chapters – the prophet declared his ‘Thus says *the Lord*’ *no less than 25 times* – to the gospel of Matthew in which gospel alone Jesus declared His distinctive ‘I say unto you’ *over 55 times*.² Hence the voice out of the bright cloud on what Peter calls the Holy Mount ... ‘*This is My beloved Son ... hear Him*’. It was time for the great prophets Moses and Elijah to step down – leaving ‘Jesus only’.

Then again, not only (as we read) was the Lord surrounded by ‘**great crowds** (multitudes)’ at the foot of both mountains, Matt. 8. 1; Mark 9. 14, but on both occasions, He was met by a man who **knelt** before him – (i) ‘there came a leper *to him*’, Mark says, ‘beseeching him, and *kneeling down to him*’, Mark 1. 40 – and (ii) at the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration, ‘when they were come to the multitude, there came *to him* a man (the father of the young boy), *kneeling down to him*’, Matt. 17. 14, and who **confronted Him with a tremendous need**.

For, on both occasions, the case presented to Jesus was **extreme** – first, that of a man who not only had leprosy – but who, according to *doctor* Luke, was ‘full of leprosy’, Luke 5. 12 – that is, this was a case where the leprosy had spread over his whole body, covering him from head to foot – not affecting merely his *hand* – as with Moses temporarily at ‘the Bush’, ‘Put your hand into your bosom ... when he took it out, behold, it was leprous as snow’, Exod. 4. 6 – or merely his *forehead* – as with Uzziah, King of Judah, permanently – of whom it is said, ‘he was marvelously helped, until he was strong’. Note that word ‘until’ – it's a rather scary word – it means something is about to happen – the mood music has changed – ‘But’, it continues, ‘when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to *his* destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense’ – and the sequel was that ‘while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead ... and Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death’, 2 Chron. 26. 15-21. But, doctor Luke noted, *the man who knelt before Jesus* was an altogether exceptional case – this man was full of leprosy.

The second extreme case was that of a young boy who was not only possessed by an unclean spirit but by a particularly nasty, strong and malicious spirit – the Lord's statement ‘*this kind* does not come out except by ...’ singled out this spirit as exceptional - this was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill demon. And the obstinacy and power of resistance displayed by this particular demon stands in marked contrast to the cowed, supplicating spirit shown by the ‘legion’ which inhabited the man among the tombs in Gadara, Mark 5. 13 – who, we read, twice ‘besought Jesus’.

But these were not only two extreme cases – they were two very **sad and distressing cases**. According to the Law, the leper was cut off from *all* social contact – forbidden to come near the dwellings of his fellow-men – ‘He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his habitation shall be outside the camp’, Lev. 13. 46. The rabbis carried this

further. If a leper was seen on a public street it was considered permissible to pelt him with eggs or even stones.³ A leper was to keep at least two yards from a healthy person, or 50 yards if the wind was blowing from the leper's direction.⁴

As for the boy, He was the last of the three '*only*' children entered in Dr Luke's casebook in chapters 7 to 9 of his gospel – beginning with the instance when Jesus 'came nigh to the gate of the city, and there was a dead man carried out, the *only* son of his mother, and she was a widow', 7. 12 – followed by 'a man named Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue: who fell down at Jesus' feet, and besought him that he would come into his house: for he had *one only* daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying', 8. 42; and concluding now 'behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is my *only* child', 9. 38.

And, on account of the presence of the unclean spirit, this 'only child' was not only epileptic but both deaf and dumb – 'Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him' – he was unable therefore either to hear his parents' words of loving comfort or to make known anything of his own anguish, fears or distress.

Then again, at the close of the first incident, Jesus '**charged**' (He 'sternly warned/strictly admonished', that is, Mark 1. 43) the cleansed leper to **tell 'no one'** what had happened to him (the leper). Immediately before the second incident, Jesus '**charged**' (He 'ordered', 'commanded', that is, Mark 9. 9) His disciples to **tell 'no one'** what had happened to *Him* (the Lord Jesus) on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

Then again, in both narratives, we read the word '**compassion**'. First, the leper. 'Jesus, moved (filled) with *compassion*, put forth his hand, and touched him', Mark 1. 41 – and in the case of the boy, it was his father who pleaded – 'if you can do any thing, have *compassion* on us, and help us', 9. 22. As always, the Lord's feelings of pity moved Him to works of love and kindness. For Jesus, compassion was no empty sentiment – it was a pity which expressed itself in action. He was not only sensitive to feel, He was ready to act – and He was mighty to deliver.

And I note Jesus healed the leper even though He (the Lord Jesus) knew that, in spite of His explicit stern warning, the man would later broadcast and 'blaze abroad (spread about)' what he had done for him, Mark 1. 45. As a result of which, the Lord was no longer able to enter the cities to preach there – as He desired, and for which purpose He said He had come, 'Let us go into the next towns', He said, 'that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth', 1. 38 – but was compelled to stay outside 'in desert places', Mark 1. 45. And here lies a sad twist to the story, in that Jesus now faced a situation not dissimilar to that which had previously faced the leper himself – remember Lev. 13. 46, 'his habitation shall be outside (LXX as Mark 1. 45) the camp!' But although the leper's misplaced zeal was to limit and hamper our Lord's future activity in the region, He still healed the man. What a wonderful, compassionate Saviour you people have!

Then, yet again, in both cases we read of the **physical contact** made by Jesus. In the case of the leper, our Lord didn't send him – as Elisha did Naaman the Syrian leper – to wash seven times in the Jordan – nor even did He do as Naaman had *expected* Elisha to do, to wave His hand over the leprosy and heal it, 2 Kings 5. 11. Our Lord didn't wave His hand – He 'stretched out'⁵ His hand and actually touched him, Matt. 8. 3 – no doubt reaching – stretching – out His hand – not just 'putting' it out – to touch the leper, because the leper hadn't dared come close enough for Him to touch him otherwise. What a moment! I wonder when the man had last felt a human touch.

By touching an unclean leper, any ordinary person would, of course, have automatically become ceremonially defiled himself. But at *Jesus*' touch *nothing* remains defiled. Far from Himself becoming unclean, Jesus makes the unclean to be clean – 'immediately the leprosy left him', Mark 1. 42.

And, when the boy lay, as dead, on the ground, the Lord reached down to take hold on the hand of the boy – the word translated 'took hold', Mark 9. 27, meaning properly 'to be strong' or 'mighty' – that is, the Saviour grasped, gripped the boy's hand firmly.

Yet again, in both cases, stress is laid on **the completeness of the cure**. In the one case, the leper was sent to the priest – among other things, to prove – to certify – that his leprosy was well and truly cleansed – that he was a leper no more – as was Jesus normal practice with healed lepers – as witness the 10 lepers cleansed in Luke 17. 14 – 'who stood at a distance, lifting up *their* voices, saying, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And seeing them, he said unto them, Go show yourselves to the priests' – one leper of which was, Luke noted, a Samaritan.

And we remember that scripture makes it clear that *only God* could cure biblical leprosy - hence the words of Jehoram the King of Israel – when he suspected that, in sending Naaman, commander of the Syrian army, to him to be cured, Benhadad II, the King of Syria, was seeking some quarrel with him – 'Am I God', he asked, 'to kill and to make alive, that this man sends to me to recover a man of his leprosy?', 2 Kings 5. 7.⁶ Hence also, the message the Lord sent to John the Baptist. When John sent messengers to Jesus to enquire, 'Are you the coming one, or are

we to look for another?', Jesus told them to tell John that, not only did the blind receive their sight and the dead were raised up, but 'the lepers are cleansed', Matt. 11. 5. But – whatever the healing of this leper had to say about *our Lord's* status – both as Son of God and as the Messiah – the leper was a leper *no more*.⁷

In the second case, Jesus explicitly commanded the unclean spirit to 'come out' of the boy and to 'enter into him *no more*', Mark 9.25. In both cases the healings weren't only instantaneous ... showing that they were achieved – not by natural means – but by divine power ... they were permanent.⁸

Yes – there are *many* fascinating points of contact between these two incidents.

But you undoubtedly noticed the one **striking difference** between the stories. In the one, the man (the leper) implored Jesus, '*If you will, you can ...*'.⁹ But in the other, the man (the boy's father) implored Him, '*If you can ...*'. I stand in awe of the leper's faith. He may well have known of our Lord's healing activity throughout the district, 4. 24, but we know of no case of a leper being healed by Jesus before. Yet the man entertains no doubts about the Lord's healing power – he feared only that, because of his defiled condition, the Lord would not want to cleanse him and that he might therefore be passed by. But what of the other man – the boy's father? Oh, we might be tempted to say, 'If you can' was an extremely foolish and silly thing for him to say. But we mustn't be too hard on the man. We can't really blame him for his doubts. Indeed, it would have been surprising if he hadn't been disappointed and thoroughly disheartened by the Lord's disciples' earlier proven inability to help.

His original intention had been to bring his son to Jesus Himself – 'I brought my son to you', Mark 9. 17 – but when he found that the Teacher was absent (still up the mountain with Peter, James and John), quite understandably he had turned to the Lord's disciples, and referred the case to them. 'I spoke to your disciples, that *they* should cast it out, but they *could not*'. Is it therefore any wonder that he now asks, 'If *you* can do anything ...'.

The combined power of nine apostles was baffled by this particular demon. We can readily understand therefore why the Lord later directed His 70 disciples – whom He sent into the towns and villages ahead of Him – why He directed them to rejoice – not that they exercised authority over the demons in His name – but that their names were written in heaven, Luke 10. 17-20. He directs them to base their joy – not on *the power of His name on earth* but on *the presence of their names in heaven* – not on the ebb and flow of successful and effective service for Him – but on that which – praise God! – can never fluctuate or change. I note that in Philippians 4, the apostle, having referred to some of his fellow-labourers as those 'whose names are in the book of life', immediately added his double 'Rejoice', Phil. 4. 3-4 – coming from a man who spent a lot of time with the author of the third gospel, an association of thought perhaps?

'Bring him to *Me*', He commanded, Mark 9. 19. The question about how long the boy had 'been like this', v. 21, was addressed by Jesus – not to the young sufferer himself – but to the father – not only because the sufferer was just a boy, but because the poor lad was both deaf and dumb – and could therefore have neither heard nor answered. In effect, Jesus said to the father, 'The question, sir, isn't "if *I* can" but "if *you* can"! The point at issue really isn't My power but your faith. To some extent at least, sir, the cure of your boy depends, not on Me, but on you. Do you believe I can do this?'

What a predicament for the man – to be told that his son's healing rested on *his* faith. He had earlier pleaded, '... have compassion on us and *help us*' – linking himself with his son – but now he focuses his request for 'help' on himself alone and on what he has been told is his greatest need - '*help my unbelief*'. It is as though he pleads, 'Yes, Lord, I do believe – I really do believe – but I fear that my very faith is weak and defective. I desperately need You to increase and strengthen it – I need You to remove whatever remaining doubts or unbelief lurk within me, that I may secure my son's healing – which means everything in the world to me'.

It was enough!! Jesus addressed the unclean spirit - 'I' (the Greek is emphatic – in effect, 'Not now one – or nine – of *My disciples*, but **I**) command (not just 'charge' as KJV – but as the storm on the lake, 'What manner of man is this! for he commands even the winds and water, and they obey him'. Luke 8. 25) you to come out of him ... and never enter him again'. And this exceptionally strong demon at the foot of the mount was no more a match for the Lord Jesus and His word – was no more able to resist such unmistakable authority – than had been the whole legion of demons which had possessed and ruled the man who dwelt in the tombs of Gadara in chapter 5.¹⁰

So much for the stories themselves. But these stories hold several simple, practical lessons for each of us today:

(i) **It isn't possible – or even desirable – that we dwell perpetually in the glow and glory of some mountain-top experience.** Our pathway of service – as that of the Master – leads us down to the place where human need cries out for our compassion and action. Even Jesus wouldn't stay on the mountain! In the case of the Mount of the Transfiguration, love brought Him down from the place of *glory and splendour* to the place of *distress and misery* – from the place where heaven visited earth for a night to the place where the powers of darkness reigned.

Peter needed to learn that it is equally 'good to be here' at the foot of the mount – among the needs of men – as it is to be on top of the mount – in the presence of the glorified Lord. It is interesting that Luke uses the very same word to describe what astonished the men at *the foot* of the mountain as Peter uses to describe what had astonished James, John and himself at *the top!* – 'they were all amazed', Luke says, 'at the mighty power (the magnificence, the majestic greatness) of God', Luke 9. 43; 'we', Peter says, 'were eyewitnesses of his majesty (magnificence, majestic greatness), 2 Pet. 1. 16. And the Lord's true majesty was as evident in His humble service for the needy as it was in the honour and glory which He received from God the Father on the holy mount, 2 Pet. 1. 17.

(ii) We also **need to pray with greater confidence** – not '*if you can ...*' – but '*if you will, you can ...*' – armed with the confidence that He is indeed '*able to do* (ie He '*can do*', same word) superabundantly beyond whatever we ask or think', Eph. 3. 20.

(iii) From the unwelcome effects of the leper's disobedience, we learn that **the commands of our Lord must be obeyed at all cost**. Jesus wanted to avoid becoming known simply as a mere wonder worker. He had come to fulfill His mission of sacrificial suffering before being publicly proclaimed as Messiah. As we noted earlier, the healing of lepers was one of the messianic signs of which John the Baptist had been reminded when in prison, Luke 7. 22, and the crowds were always ready to apply to Jesus their commonly held view of the Messiah as a military and political deliverer.¹¹ But he had come to die – not to trounce the Romans. The cleansed leper's disobedience to Jesus' word – however well-meaning – therefore frustrated our Lord's work rather than advanced it. The Lord's ways are always best – and ultimately all disobedience to His word (no matter how plausible it may seem at the time) will lead to loss.

(iv) Alas, **the disciples' failure at the foot of the mount reflected badly on Jesus** – leading the boy's father to question even *the Lord's* ability. It is sobering to reflect that it is by *my* actions and conduct that men measure and judge not only me but *my Lord*.

(v) And let *us* never permit the failure which *we* find – or perhaps think *we* find – in others of the Lord's people to cause us to doubt the Lord Himself – to doubt His power, His love or whatever. Let us determine to **press beyond our disappointment in other Christians** to focus on the Lord Himself – who never fails – who never disappoints.

And (vi) from the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration, we learn that **faith and prayer are absolutely necessary to sustain our God-given gifts and our service for the Lord**. In reply to the question, 'Why were we not able to cast it out?', Matthew reports Jesus' words, 'Because of your little faith', Matt. 17. 20¹², while Mark draws attention to the Lord's comment about the need for prayer – 'this kind can come out by nothing, except by prayer', Mark 9. 29.

Earlier, the disciples had been given authority over the demonic world and had exercised that authority on many occasions, 3. 14-15; 6. 13. It seems to me that, on the basis of their past successes, they may well have taken it for granted that the power somehow now lay in themselves and that – as in the past – they would always be successful. They may therefore have felt no renewed sense of dependence on God – neglecting to pray earnestly to Him for *His* blessing and power. And without renewed trust in God and without prayer, they failed – and failed miserably. We too must ever remember that neither our spiritual gifts, nor any past effective service, can substitute for prayer, and for constant, conscious dependence on God and His power.

End-notes

¹ Matt. 8. 2-4; 8. 14-17; 9. 2-13 almost certainly took place before the Sermon on the Mount - cf. Mark 1. 29-34, 40-45, Luke 4. 38-41. Matthew does not purport to follow anything other than a topical arrangement, and most of his "time" indicators are very loose. This does not mean that Matthew's arrangement is haphazard but that it is governed by themes. Linkage from pericope to pericope is provided by ideas, catchwords, dominant motifs.

² The prophets spoke *for* God; He spoke as God.

³ John Ortberg, '*Love Beyond Reason*', page 50.

⁴ 'No less a distance than four cubits (six feet) must be kept from a leper; or, if the wind came from that direction, a hundred were scarcely sufficient. Rabbi Meir would not eat an egg purchased in a street where there was a leper. Another Rabbi boasted, that he always threw stones at them to keep them far off, while others hid themselves or ran away ... He would have fled from a Rabbi; he came in lowliest attitude of entreaty to Jesus', Edersheim, '*Life and Times*', Book III, chapter 15.

⁵ Not simply 'put out' but 'stretched out' – contrast Jeroboam I, who 'stretched out' (LXX is the same as Matt. 8.3) his hand – which dried up, 1 Kings 13. 4. No doubt Jesus had to reach out to touch the leper because the leper did not dare come close to Him.

⁶ Healings were considered as difficult as raising the dead, SBK, 4:745ff.

⁷ 'Significantly, His work began [*this is our Lord's first recorded single miracle in the Synoptic gospels*] where that of the Rabbis, we had almost said of the Old Testament saints, ended. Whatever remedies, medical, magical, or sympathetic, Rabbinic writings may indicate for various kinds of disease, leprosy is not included in the catalogue ... Rabbinism confessed itself powerless in presence of this living death. Although ... the sacrificial ritual for the cleansed leper implies, at least, the possibility of a cure, it is in every instance traced to the direct agency of God', Edersheim, '*Life and Times*', Book III, chapter 15.

⁸ The one was a 'testimony' to the priests, Matt. 8. 4; the other a testimony to the scribes – who may well have been enjoying a case where the disciples of Jesus had failed – taking full advantage of the opportunity to discredit Christ and his apostles before the people, Mark 9. 14, 26-27. The scribes had clearly felt uneasy about His sudden arrival – and appear to have thought better of answering His question about the subject of the debate and dispute between them and the apostles – leaving it to the father of the child to explain – perhaps breaking an embarrassing silence.

⁹ "If you are willing" reflects the leper's great faith, prompted by Jesus' healing activity throughout the district (4. 24): he had no question about Jesus' healing power but feared only that, because of his defiled condition, he would be passed by.

¹⁰ The obstinacy shown by this particular demon stands in marked contrast to the cowed, supplicating spirit shown by the Gerasene legion. 'They were all astounded at the majesty of God', Luke 9. 43 - the earlier failure of the disciples only emphasized the majestic power of the Master.

¹¹ To show that Jesus is not presenting himself as a mere wonder worker, who can be pressured into messiahship by crowds whose messianic views are materialistic and political. Jesus' authority derives from God alone, not the acclaim of men. He came to die, not to trounce the Romans.

¹² The failure of the disciples was not because of any insufficiency of power in Jesus, but was due to their own failure to appropriate that power by faith. Clearly, the disciples were part of the 'unbelieving' generation of which Jesus spoke, Mark 9. 19.