

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

This Sunday's Gospel may seem like a bit of a repeat of last Sunday's. Last Sunday, Jesus healed a man who was deaf and mute. This Sunday, we hear how Jesus helped a boy who was "*mute and deaf*." But there is a difference, for in the first case, the man's ailments were all physical; in the case we're looking at today, the boy's ailments were the result of an unclean spirit. Moreover, in last week's Gospel, Mark was pointing us to the fact that Jesus' healing miracles showed Him to be the God who was foretold by prophets. This week, Mark is making a different point.

We have fast-forwarded two chapters from last week, and in the meantime, Jesus had performed more miracles; Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ; Jesus foretold His passion and resurrection for the first time and then told His disciples that discipleship means denying oneself and taking up his cross. Jesus taught the disciples that losing one's life for Jesus' sake and the gospel's will save it. He was teaching them that the glory of the Christian life is not in oneself, but in Christ.

Jesus then took Peter, James, and John, up the mountain and was transfigured before them. And coming down from the mountain, Jesus again told these three that "*the Son of Man [will] suffer many things and be treated with contempt,*" but that He will rise from the dead. Which brings us to our Gospel, where this small entourage meets back up with Jesus' other disciples.

Those others had stayed below, and in the meantime, a man — a father — had come to them and implored their help. He wanted them to cast out the mute and deaf spirit that was afflicting his son. Now, the disciples may have thought, "We've got this," after all, Jesus had earlier sent out the disciples, giving them "*authority over the unclean spirits*" (Mark 6:7); and, indeed, they came back from their little missionary trip reporting that "*they cast out many demons*" and healed "*many who were sick*" (Mark 6:13).

However, much to the disappointment of the father, but to the glee of the scribes who were there to witness it, the disciples were unable to cast it out. Thus when Jesus came upon them, our text says, the scribes were arguing with the disciples — no doubt with a bit of scoffing. That's when the crowd saw Jesus and thronged him with amazement and joy. That's when we learn from the father's own mouth of the affliction of his son.

Yet, brazenly undeterred even by Jesus' presence, the unclean spirit "*convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.*" Implored by the father to do what His disciples could not, Jesus complied. He cast out the unclean spirit and ordered him never to return. He took the boy by the hand and lifted him up. Truly, "*with God all things are possible*" (Mark 10:27), for it was

not the strength of the father's faith that effected this miracle. The father clearly had doubts. Oh, he may have begun the day with confidence, but the disciples' impotence bred doubts. Thus the father said to Jesus, "*if YOU can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*"

Of course, Jesus could, and He did. But before He did, He responded to that petition with a bit of a riddle. "*If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.*" What did Jesus mean by repeating the man's qualifier?

Well, I don't think Jesus responded with a question filled with indignation at the man's doubts — "*If you CAN? What do you mean, If you CAN?*" — No! Rather, I think it was a statement filled with resignation. Perhaps He sighed again, as He did in last week's Gospel — "*If you can ...*" — and followed that by a strong exhortation to believe.

And the father did believe. He cried out to Jesus in his wavering faith, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" He had faith, but he also had doubts — the kind of faith we often exhibit. It's the kind of faith that looks for solutions where God has not promised — like the disciples did without success, for Jesus hadn't continued that authority. Yet they thought that they could cast out this unclean spirit. "*O faithless generation,*" Jesus said to them; "*how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?*"

Don't we often also put our faith in the wrong thing, like in the midst of challenge and tragedy? In whom do you trust? In yourself and your own innate ability to get through it, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps? Or maybe you simply "refuse to acknowledge the suffering," and think that that will make it go away? But ask those who in recent days have lost house and home to fire or wind or water. Self-denial does not solve the problem. Or maybe you trust in government or institutions or people that can help, but so often fail us, which then lead us to doubt and distrust of everyone and everything.

It's in the midst of all of these doubts that Jesus enters into our life and answers our own "*if you can*" with "*All things are possible for one who believes.*" All things are possible for him who puts his trust in the Lord, who says, "*You are my God,*" who cries out, "*save me in your steadfast love,*" who courageously waits for the Lord (Ps. 31:14, 16).

Here, you see, the focus is not on your faith, but on the object of that faith. When the father says, "*I believe,*" he is trusting in Jesus, the One who can. When he says, "*help my unbelief,*" he is acknowledging the natural tendency to look first everywhere but to God in a kind of idolatry. Repent! Look first to Jesus in true faith, a faith that Jesus elsewhere commends when He says, "*your faith has saved you*" (Luke 7:50). He's talking about a faith that trusts in Him, in His work, in His

words. To be sure, God uses means to accomplish His good, and so, you may look at church and government and other institutions for help, but first we lift up our eyes to the hills from where our help comes ... from the Lord (Ps. 121:1-2).

For you did not atone for sins, nor did your faith. Jesus did. The One who “*set [His] face like a flint*” toward Jerusalem (Is. 50:7), toward Zion, toward Golgotha did. The One who “*gave [His] back to those who strike*” did. The One who gave His “*cheeks to those who pull out the beard*” did. The One who “*hid not [His] face from disgrace and spitting*” did (Is. 50:6). The One who humbled Himself and endured the shame of the cross did. The One who was vindicated by cross and resurrection did. The One whose blood sacrifice propitiated the sins of the world did.

And He did it even though we often have a weak and wavering faith. He did it not only to atone for our sins, but also that our faith in Him, who could do such a marvelous thing, might be strengthened. “Lord, help our unbelief.”

Moreover, Jesus gives the fruit of what He did in His sacrifice to us in more things that He does, in His sacraments. He does it not because we deserve it or because our faith is so strong, but precisely because we, who are weak in faith, need help in our unbelief. And so He cleanses us by water and His word and gives us salvation; He gives His Holy Spirit and calls us to faith; He invites us to daily contrition and repentance; He forgives us our sins and gives us His righteousness; He feeds us with the meal of His body and blood. And our faith doesn't effect any of this — Jesus does; He makes the impossible possible. Our faith only receives these gifts and the blessings they offer. Our weak faith is thereby strengthened, and we are assured of life in Him.

So, thanks be to God and all glory be to Jesus who CAN do all things and DOES all this freely, without any merit or worthiness in us. With God all things are possible, so yes, He CAN. But more than that, He wills it. He wants to do it. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to live in faith. He wants you to live in the forgiveness of sins. He wants to raise you up on the last day. He wants you to come unto Him when you're weary. He wants you to cry out in your weakness, “*I believe; Lord, help my unbelief.*” And He will strengthen your faith and give you rest.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.