

29 - TRUE AND FALSE AUTHORITY

Luke 9:37-50

At least until the middle of the 20th century, the description of the epileptic child in 9:39 and 42 was the best medical description available. Neuroscience and digital imaging have given us much greater detail and understanding of what happens in the brain during epileptic seizures. Surprisingly, this passage focuses attention on two aspects of Jesus' character: his compassion for those who are sick and his impatience with those who do not share that understanding and love for those in need.

The significance of this incident, however, is in vs. 43. Jesus' healing miracles always pointed to the greatness and glory of God. That was not what the disciples who had not been with Jesus on the mountain shortly before may have felt. He castigated them for their failure to help the anxious father who had brought his son to Jesus for healing. His criticism may have been due to the fact that he had so recently shared with them his power and authority. On this occasion they had not been successful in making use of it.

Jesus followed this healing with some harsh words about the difficulties of following him in what lay ahead. He knew that his betrayal was likely to occur in the not too distant future. He may not have known who would do it, but he was well aware of that those opposed to his ministry were seeking an end to his disruption of their power and authority. The disciples, of course, were still dealing with their very mixed feelings about their

recognition of his presence as the Messiah and the sting of his criticisms for their failures. They had no comprehension whatever of his warning about the darkening future.

Instead, they engaged in a childish debate as to which of them was the greatest. The discussion revealed the depth of their confusion. His frustration perhaps hidden, Jesus seized the opportunity to show them what he really meant about humility. He set a child beside him as they stood around eager to hear what he might have to say next. This child, he pointed out, was the greatest in God's sight because this child had welcomed the chance to be near him and so near to God. Whoever welcomed a child like this welcomed him.

This attitude completely contradicted the normal basis for society. Children are at the bottom of every hierarchically structured social order. Those with power, authority, honour and merit always have precedence. By placing himself beside this child, he was actually putting himself in the child's place. In so doing he also rebuked their argument about which one of them should have precedence. He was reiterating what he had said earlier: those who chose to save their lives for their own sake would lose it, while those who sought to lose their lives for his sake would find salvation.

The final episode brings another issue to the fore. A stranger had been using Jesus' name in casting out demons. The disciples had stopped him. But Jesus again rebuked them, adding that whoever was not against them was really helping them.