

God chooses how to equip us for a job

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When things are looking grim out there on the field, there's nothing like an inspirational moment for getting things back on track, is there. A fresh player comes on, scores that sensational goal, and the dejected team suddenly springs back to life. Enough Olympic gold may even lead to elections being called in some parts of the world. What do they say – nothing succeeds like success?

If you weren't here last week, you missed some inspirational stories. A woman who'd suffered from bleeding for twelve years was instantly healed when she managed to touch Jesus' clothing. And just after that, Jesus called Jairus's twelve-year-old daughter back from the dead. Inspiration, compassion, power.

Logically, I'd expect the gospel writer to use miracles like these as the launching pad for today's story of the disciples being sent out on their first missionary journey. Wouldn't that give them a boost!? But that's not what happens. Instead, there's the strange episode where we read about Jesus being rejected by the people of his home town. All the excitement of the last few chapters, his profound teaching and his miraculous deeds of power all brought crashing to earth in this humiliating homecoming. *He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief*

Now he sends out his disciples. But hasn't Mark shot himself in the foot? What sort of launch is this for the disciples' mission? It seems so weak. Where was Mark's editor!? ... How

important are the miracle stories of Jesus to you? Do they inspire you? Are they very important for how you understand Jesus, or is there something else about Jesus that really gets you interested in him? What is it that really draws you to Jesus? Let's ponder that in silence for a bit – or chat with a neighbour.

I don't think it's ever struck me so clearly before, how this part of Mark's gospel focuses on weakness as the heart of Christian mission. Jesus is weak in the face of his scandalized townspeople. Jesus sends out his disciples with practically no equipment for their journey – no chance of self-sufficiency. And next week, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist will be executed by King Herod. What is Mark doing here? How can this be 'the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'?

Mark is teaching us something about the meaning of faith. We sometimes talk about people having strong faith, and maybe we admire them. But what Mark says here is that faith is not about being strong for God. Quite the opposite. It's about deciding to open to God's leading, God's strength; being ready to respond to God.

It's about risk – not confidence. So Mark is saying that faith is something we receive when our hands are empty, because then they're free to catch it. God throws us an opportunity – and we must learn how to know when that happens – and we have to choose to drop what we're doing and catch hold of what God sends us. Faith means we put our agenda to one side so we're available for God. It means we let go of our security blanket and walk away from it; walk vulnerably into the future that God holds before us. Have you done this, or met someone who has?

However we look at it, it's uncomfortable; I know. So many of us are used to being in control. Or else we think we don't want to put God to any unnecessary trouble on our account.

We'll just call on God in emergencies. But normally, we'll be adult about our faith and look after most things ourselves thanks very much.

Can you hear how ridiculous that is? We heard Paul wrestle with just this question.

You remember Paul thought he had a handicap that was bad for his mission. He was sure he could do a better job if God fixed it. But God didn't, and instead, answered Paul's prayers in a very interesting way. *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.* That's what God said to Paul. . *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*

What I hear in that is that however God chooses to equip me for a job, it will be enough. And not being good enough myself – and knowing I'm not good enough – won't matter. God will get done what God chooses to get done. If God calls me to be a part of a job, I'm free to be thoroughly unselfconscious about it: to be in the middle of it all and simply to delight with everyone else at the wonders of God.

Let's hear how Paul puts it in *The Message* translation – this wonderful freedom that Jesus gives him in his weakness.

God said, 'My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.' Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I stopped focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer; these limitations that cut me down to size – abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

Lord Jesus, may we discover the freedom there is in your love for us as the people we are, and to trust that when you call us, you will work in us and with us so we will rejoice to see

the job done. Amen.