



‘I believe; help my unbelief!’
A reflection and intercession based on
Mark 9:14–29 and on John Reilly’s
painting, *Healing of the lunatic boy*

Janet Morley

JANET MORLEY is a writer, speaker and retreat leader, who used to work for the British Methodist Church's Connexional Team. She was the first commissioning editor of *Holiness*.

morleyjanet@ymail.com
Sheffield, UK

JOHN REILLY (1928–2010) offered modern interpretations of many stories from the Old and New Testaments through his oil paintings. His distinctive use of geometric patterning and jewel-like colours make his work instantly recognisable.

John Reilly, *The healing of the lunatic boy* (1958) from the Methodist Modern Art Collection, © TMCP, used with permission.



At the very centre of the gospel narrative there is the story of a dramatic healing of a child, whose desperate father struggles to have faith that his son can ever be made well. The child is unable to hear or speak, and he frequently suffers major fits which place his life in danger. Like many healing stories in Mark, the story is presented as an exorcism, in which Jesus has the power to command the forces of evil to surrender.

The context is crucial. After seeking to teach them about his suffering to come, Jesus and three of his disciples have been on the mountain top. Peter, James and John have witnessed Jesus being transfigured in light, accompanied by Moses – the great leader of the Israelites who spoke to God 'face to face' – and Elijah – the prophet who was expected to return in preparation for the Messiah. It is as if the glory of God has broken through the bounds of ordinary life, and the true underlying reality of things has been suddenly revealed. Meanwhile, the disciples who were left behind have been approached by the suffering family of the boy, but they have failed to help him. Some scholars believe that each of Jesus' exorcisms is symbolic of the grip of evil in certain situations. Here, where the spirit is deaf and dumb, even the privileged disciples who accompany Jesus on the mountain top have been shown to be deaf to the language about the Cross, although they are instructed by the voice from heaven to listen. And in what they say, the disciples are way off mark. Peter babbles about constructing booths, 'for he didn't know what he was supposed to say'.

Jesus' appearance as he comes down from the mountain clearly fills the crowd with awe – perhaps his face is shining like that of Moses returning to his people after receiving the Law. Perhaps there is even an echo of the story of Moses' ominous return from the mountain top to discover that the people's faith in God has wavered, and they have begun to worship a golden calf image instead. But whatever Old Testament echoes Mark may be employing, he shows Jesus immediately engaging with the messy situation in front of him, asking what everyone has been arguing about. He waves no magic wand. Instead he asks about the child's symptoms and their duration, as the controlling spirit throws the boy into a deadly convulsion there and then. Combining compassion and challenge in his conversation with the father, Jesus then demonstrates his authority over evil by commanding the spirit to go, taking the child by the hand and lifting him from what looks like death.

In this evocative painting by John Reilly, we see depicted the moments just before and just after the exorcism. On the right of the picture, in grey darkness,

is the boy being convulsed and thrown to the ground, his eyes wide, staring and fearful, his limbs twisted. Either side of him are two adults – perhaps his parents, perhaps the disciples who failed to heal him. They look anxious and desperate to help; yet their arms seem to flail. Each is enclosed in their own trap of torment; they are paralysed and helpless as evil rages before them and within them. Their body shapes echo the contorted shape into which the boy's body has been thrown. By contrast, on the left, the figure of Jesus stands calm and strong, and the boy himself is standing up, watching Jesus, his body posture echoing the strength and dignity of the one who has healed him. Both of them are bathed in the light and power of God, which seems to have been brought from the mountain top to bless this child. But it is as if these figures are in another world adjacent to, but untouched by, the grey world of suffering and evil in which the others are trapped. How can we move from one to the other?

That is exactly the dilemma of anyone who tries to pray about the suffering of the world or about their own suffering. This is why prayer is so hard; we feel that we are locked into confusion and have no access to hope. Prayer is an act of courage, which dares to believe that we can step out of what binds us so closely, into the light of God. Christians over countless generations have found the cry of the child's father echoes the ambivalence of their own faith: 'I believe; help my unbelief!' We seek to pray not only because we believe but in order that we may believe better.

Questions to ponder

- When you look at Reilly's painting, which part of it draws your eye first? How does it affect the meaning of the picture for you, if you 'read' it from left to right, rather than right to left?
- Have you ever experienced prayer (either your own prayer or that of others on your behalf) which effectively released you from feeling stuck or trapped, helping you to move into the light of God?

A prayer

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of light and compassion,
we live in a turbulent and violent world
where it is hard to believe in your power to stop evil in its tracks.
We feel helpless to protect even the children:
those who have no place of safety in conflict,
or are themselves trained to war;
those who are targeted by sexual predators and traffickers;
those who suffer and die from conditions we could easily cure.
We long for your help, your power to command evil to surrender.

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of strength and calm,
we live with turbulent hearts and minds, and fragile bodies,
where it is hard to believe in your power to transform our lives.
Look on us in our confusion, our distorted thinking,
our despairing or resentful feelings,
our sense that we are controlled by forces, desires and fears
that mean us harm.
We long for your help, your power to command evil to surrender.

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief

Lord of love and power,
we have no power to help ourselves,
or make a difference to our world.
Take us by the hand and lift us out of all that traps us;
make us stand next to you, strong and calm
able in your light to see what is true and what is false,
renewed with strength to command evil in your name,
and work for the coming of your kingdom in this world.

Amen.

