

Mark 8.1-21

Jesus is... the misunderstood Messiah

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 25 August 2024

Mark – Who is Jesus? [20]

Misunderstanding

J A salesman telephoned a household and a young boy answered. ‘May I speak to your mother?’ the salesman asked. The boy replied, ‘She’s not here right now.’

The salesman then asked, ‘Is there anyone else there?’ ‘My sister,’ the boy said. So the salesman asked, ‘May I speak to her?’ The boy replied, ‘Sure.’

At this point there was a long period of silence on the phone. Then the boy returned and said, ‘Hello?’

The salesman responded, ‘It’s you again? I thought you were going to get your sister.’ To which the boy replied, ‘I tried, but I can’t lift her out of her cot!’

Have you ever misunderstood something or someone? Or have you been misunderstood?

Reading Scripture

One misunderstanding of this passage is that it's the same event as the feeding of the five thousand – which Mark recorded in chapter 6. I have very little time for that attitude when it comes to reading Scripture. For starters, it assumes Mark was an idiot who didn't realise it was the one event. Then you have to say Mark actually made up stuff Jesus said, because in 8.19-20 Jesus talks about them as two separate events. Finally you need to act as if you know better than someone who spoke to eyewitnesses and wrote his account 20-30 years after these events took place.

The Bible is not always easy to understand, but it's so important when we read it that we start from a position of humility. These are the words that God has given us to reveal himself to us: so we can know him; to teach us, encourage us, challenge us; to equip us and train us in godliness; these are the words of life; this book is the most precious thing in this world. Let's treat it with respect – which means reading it **as God's Word** – and in fact *reading* it!

So – why two almost identical miracles? In a sense, why not? I think it's important because the last place Mark mentions is a Gentile region, a non-Jewish area, so like last week I think it shows Jesus came for *all*, even though Israel came first.

Compassion (1-10)

Mark begins with **another large crowd** (1). If you were here last week you'll know Jesus had hoped for a bit of a breather, but **he could not keep his presence secret** (7.24). **J** Some people wanted healing, some wanted to see something spectacular, others to hear him preach. Here they gathered by the lakeside and spent **three days** with Jesus (2) – **three days!** Some of them must have slept on the hillside – though I do wonder where they all went to the toilet. Perhaps that's why Jesus often taught by the lake?!

J When Jess and I go for a hike, we usually take sandwiches to eat at the top of whatever mountain we're walking up – and also some extras for emergencies like a protein bar. But even at our most prepared we'd be *very* hungry after three days.

After three days this crowd had obviously all eaten whatever food they had brought with them, and Jesus was concerned:

'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.'

Mark 8.2-3 (NIV)

Four weeks ago Bobbie talked about **compassion**, which means recognising others' suffering *and taking tangible action*: doing something, getting involved. Here, as with the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus gets the disciples to gather what **loaves** they **have** (5), then tells **the crowd to sit down on the ground** (6).

As was common for the head of every Jewish household, and as I will do in a few minutes, **J** Jesus took the **loaves**, gave **thanks** and **broke them**, then **gave them to his disciples to distribute** (6). At some point someone found **a few small fish**, so Jesus did the same with those (7). **The people ate and were satisfied**, and again the **J broken pieces that were left over** far exceeded the original amount of food (8). From the **crumbs** that were enough last week (7.28), today we have a super-abundance of leftovers!

The compassion Jesus shows here is important, not only for the hungry crowd of thousands back then, but for us today. It shows us that Jesus cares about us as *whole* people: body and soul. There is a popular idea that has been around from first-century Gnosticism to modern understandings of identity and sexuality. It says that the 'real you' is what's 'inside' – whether we call that soul or spirit or mind or heart. The material world – even our bodies – are simply 'stuff'; what truly matters is what's inside.

Friends, that's nonsense. The Bible *could not be more clear* that God *really cares* about the world: matter *matters*. The first words of the Bible tell us that God made it, and the last words of the Bible are about a river, a vast city and a tree – not disembodied spirits floating in the sky. In between are countless examples of how God *really cares* about his world, even though it is corrupted and broken by sin. Instead of wiping it all away and starting again, time and again the Bible tells us how God takes ordinary stuff – like **seven loaves** (5) – and does incredible things with them – like feed **four thousand** people (9).

God's compassion for those people then and for you and me today is as *whole people*: body and soul. He loves your heart, from which comes good things and bad, which is often full of love and always full of deceit. He loves your mind, which wanders – it might be wandering now! – which rebels against him, but can also focus on God and delight in him. He loves your spirit when it is struggling and depressed, and when it is full of joy and worshipping God in whatever you're doing that day. And he loves your body even when it lets you down. He loves it so much he tells us to look after it, to train it and treat it like a temple for the Holy Spirit.

God's compassion for you is as a *whole person*: body and soul.

Conflict (11-13)

After the feeding miracle Jesus crosses the lake from the Gentile to the Jewish side, though we aren't sure exactly where he went. We have no other record of **Dalmanutha** (10), so it was most likely a tiny fishing village near Magadan or Magdala – as in Mary Magdalene – which is where Matthew says Jesus went at this point – a bigger place that more people would have heard of!

A few weeks ago I was fascinated by the events unfolding in America after the **J** debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump that was so disastrous for Biden.

Afterwards it seemed as though he had various delegations coming to him, trying to convince him to stop seeking re-election – some of them friendly, others less so.

I picture the Pharisees sidling up to Jesus like that – and they were definitely *not* a friendly delegation: they were looking for conflict.

J They'd heard he was nearby. Perhaps they'd heard about the miracles he'd been performing in the Decapolis. Perhaps they'd even been lying in wait for him – perhaps they were the ones he was trying to escape when he went to **Tyre** (7.24).

Whatever – Mark tells us they wanted **to question Jesus** (11).

Now there's nothing wrong with that. We all have questions for God, things we don't understand or find difficult. I've said before and I'll say it again: doubt is normal, but that doesn't mean it's ok – we have to do something about it. Asking our questions is a great way to start, so please find someone you trust and ask them!

These people though had a bad motive. They were not genuinely seeking God; they wanted to **test Jesus**, Mark says, to prove him to be a false prophet in front of his adoring public. This is not the first time they tested Jesus in Mark, and it won't be the last!

The Pharisees came and **asked him for a sign from heaven** (11). But, we might say, haven't they been paying attention? He's been casting out demons, feeding thousands, healing countless people. Don't any of those count as **a sign**?

Actually no, that's not what they had in mind. They weren't asking for a *miracle*; they wanted something *apocalyptic*, like the time **J** Elijah faced the prophets of Baal, calling down fire from heaven which burned up his soaking sacrifice, along with the stone altar and the soil underneath (1 Kings 18.38).

Except of course they wanted that *not* to happen so everyone would see Jesus was a fraud.

No wonder Jesus **sighed deeply** (12), the same word Mark used last week in 7.34. It conveys Jesus' compassion, but also his battle with evil, and the strength he was drawing from the Father. It's perhaps a bit like saying, 'Give me strength,' except Jesus *actually meant it* as a prayer to the Father, not simply as an expression of frustration. He refused to play their game (12), **got back into the boat and crossed to the other side of the lake** (13).

What are we to make of all this?

When I was at school, in an RE lesson we had to debate the existence of God. One bright spark who thought he was God's gift to atheism stood at the front of class and yelled, 'God if you exist show us a sign!' He paused, looked around, and because nothing had happened, as he walked back to his chair he shrugged, 'Point proved.'

It is tempting – I find it tempting at least – to long for, to pray for miracles and signs to 'prove' God is real and help people come to faith. Something like Elijah's would be great – but I'd settle for some incontrovertible healings. 'If only God would do this or that,' we tell ourselves, 'It would make evangelism so much easier!' Except it wouldn't. How do I know that? Because it didn't.

Confusion (14-21)

After Jesus' **compassion** for the crowd, and his **conflict** with the Pharisees comes the disciples' **confusion**. When Jesus warns them about the dangers of the attitude shown by **the Pharisees and Herod** (15), they totally miss it because they're obsessing over the fact they don't have enough bread – only a few days after Jesus fed thousands of people with next to nothing. And, they are on their way to Bethsaida (8.22): a large town with plenty of food!

What idiots. I mean really – how could they be so stupid? These things had literally only just happened. What's going on?

The key is in verse 17: Jesus said, **'Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?'** and again in verse 21: **'Do you still not understand?'**

Jesus echoes language used by Isaiah (18), which is a pattern we see throughout the Bible. In Exodus 16, not six weeks after God had parted the Sea, defeated the entire Egyptian army, and led his people to freedom – not six weeks later they were grumbling.

J In 1 Kings 19, so soon after he had seen the kind of sign the Pharisees demanded of Jesus, Elijah was in despair and prayed for God to take his life. Miracles do not usually lead to faith.

What's going on in our passage today is exactly the same. It's not that we forget what happened, it's that we move on. 'That was great yesterday,' we say to God, 'But what about today?' This is one reason why miracles – which we should pray for and seek – rarely fill the kingdom with converts: people move on.

Second, there is a profound truth here. **Knowing is not enough.** Faith – following Jesus – these things are not about knowledge. They are about trusting someone greater. When Jesus said to the disciples, '**Do you still not understand?**' he was speaking into their lack of trust. On a human level they were concerned about going hungry, while travelling to a bakery with the one who fed thousands. In that moment they didn't even *have* a spiritual level, they were so consumed with their anxiety about lunch.

Is that something you can relate to? Even when God does something *amazing*, we are so quick to move on, back to our old friend anxiety. At least, I am. Can you relate to that? Maybe it's not anxiety, maybe it's fear. Maybe it's desire. It doesn't matter what it is – if it distracts us from Jesus, like this, it's all bad.

These disciples were so distracted, they didn't have a clue, and they were in danger of missing what was happening right in front of them: the kingdom of God coming in Jesus the Messiah.

This was the danger of **the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod** (15). It has nothing to do with bread and everything to do with attitude. Jesus' enemies had already decided who he was: at best an annoyance, at worst an evil blasphemer. Since Mark 3 they have been determined to kill him.

Jesus' closest friends were in danger because *they too thought they knew who Jesus was*. They had their own picture of him in their head; and because they thought they knew who he was, **J** *they stopped listening*. Can you relate to *that*?

The disciples thought that Jesus the Messiah had come for victory and conquest – they thought he had come for glory and power. And he had, only he had come to conquer an enemy greater than the Romans, to show them that true glory is found in obedience and service, to demonstrate strength in weakness.

They thought they knew who Jesus was, so they were in danger of missing who he really is. What idiots. But what about us? Are we any better? Are we willing to listen to what God tells us about himself in Scripture, or will we insist that we know better? Will we let God challenge our internal view of Jesus with the truth of who he really is – which is probably not as 'nice' but is infinitely more glorious and true than anything we can imagine.

Can I invite you to come and find out who Jesus *really* is. Don't assume you know. Come and read, it's all here. [Point to Bible](#). The whole thing points us to him.

Back then the crowds, the Pharisees, even the disciples, thought they knew who Jesus was. They all saw the miracles but because they had a picture of him in their heads, they stopped looking and listening to find out who Jesus *really* is. From this point on the tone of Mark changes and Jesus starts teaching about how he will suffer and die – and the disciples ignored him. Please don't make the same mistake! Come and find out who Jesus *really* is.

It's much easier for us than it was for the disciples, because we live after Jesus' death on the cross: the ultimate example of love and obedience and service, the once and for all sacrifice that deals with sin. We live after his resurrection: which shows that God's life is stronger than death, that Jesus really is who he said he is. We live after his ascension to the Father: from where he sends his Holy Spirit to teach and equip and help us follow him.

The disciples lived before all that happened, so they had a really great excuse for misunderstanding who Jesus is.

They had a great excuse; **what's yours?**