

Mark 8.22-29a

'Do you see?'

Christ Church Selly Park


Sunday 1 September 2024

Mark – Who is Jesus? [21]


Seeing is believing

On 1 April 1957 the BBC News programme *Panorama* showed the following video:  *The Swiss Spaghetti Harvest*.

I particularly enjoy the bit about the 'virtual elimination of the dreaded spaghetti weevil'! Huge numbers of viewers were taken in, even contacting the BBC to ask where they might procure a 'spaghetti tree'. The reply? 'Place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best!'

In April 1934, American newspapers printed a photograph of a man flying through the air in a device powered by the breath from his lungs . Articles described how he blew into a box on his chest, which activated rotors that created a powerful suction effect, lifting him aloft. Skis on his feet served as landing gear, and a tail fin allowed him to steer.

It made its way to America thanks to Hearst's International News Photo agency which not only fell for the hoax but also distributed it to all its US subscribers.¹

These hoaxes might seem childish and obvious to us today, but what about this?  *This is Not Morgan Freeman.*

That question is at the heart of our passage today: Do you see?

‘Do you see?’

Last week the disciples got confused about some bread. In fact they got so obsessed over their lunch they forgot to listen to Jesus' teaching. Of course none of us today have that problem as we sit here listening to sermons definitely *not* thinking about lunch.

Last week our reading ended with Jesus exasperated: **‘Do you still not understand?’** he said (21). Mark leaves us with that question hanging... and the bigger one: will they *ever* understand?

Our reading today is the pivotal moment in Mark's gospel, his book answering the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ This is the turning point of the book; from this point on, everything changes. And in case you don't believe me, because I am a nerd I have prepared a couple of charts to show the difference between Mark before this passage, and Mark after this passage.

¶ In this first one we have all the miracles in Mark, split by chapter. The green line in the middle is this passage. On the left we have seventeen miracles and three ‘healing summaries’, and on the right we have five miracles – one of which is the resurrection! The miracles don’t stop, but after this point they reduce a *lot*.

¶ A similar thing happens with Jesus’ teaching, but the other way round, and less dramatically. Here we have everything in Mark’s gospel up to Jesus’ arrest, with Jesus’ words highlighted in red. Now, I don’t like Bibles which highlight the words of Jesus in red, because really the *whole* Bible should be in red – but still, it’s useful here. On the left side we have everything up to our reading today, and on the right everything after it. Jesus has been teaching all along, but after this point it increases.

In the first half of Mark Jesus’ ministry is expanding and growing out of Galilee, through Israel and the surrounding regions, until he reaches the Gentiles as we have seen in the last couple of weeks. In the second half, Jesus circles ever nearer to Jerusalem and the death that awaits him there.

This is the moment it all changes, and it all hinges around this one, simple question ¶: **Do you see?** Do you see? I know our new screens are slightly smaller – is that big enough (!)?

Verse 22: in **Bethsaida** (so we're back in Israel now) Jesus met **a blind man**. As we've seen Jesus was famous for his healing, so the man's friends **begged Jesus to touch him** (22). Wouldn't you? So Jesus **led** the man **outside the village, spat on the man's eyes** and **asked, 'Do you see?'** (23).

It's a little gross, but we'll let that pass. You'll be reassured to know that spitting on people is not part of the training for our prayer ministry team (!).

The interesting thing is that *it didn't work*. Or rather, it didn't work *completely*: ¶ **'I see people,'** the man said, **'they look like trees walking around'** (24). Was Jesus losing his touch?

Or was he simply inventing ¶ Ents centuries before JRR Tolkien (!)?

Jesus tried again – this time without the spit: **once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes.** ¶ **Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly** (25).

What a relief, I was starting to worry.

Had Jesus not had a good night's sleep or something? Was he distracted? After all the talk of bread recently, perhaps he was hangry – that tends to stop me doing things properly!

Or, perhaps it wasn't a mistake at all.

Perhaps Jesus was teaching us that a person can 'see', without *really* being able to *see*: the first time the man could **see people**, but they looked like **trees**; he could 'see', but he couldn't really *see*.

After Jesus' second attempt Mark tells us three times, to make sure we know it's important ¶ (25):

- ¶ **his eyes were opened**
- ¶ **his sight was restored**
- ¶ **he saw everything clearly**

So: ¶ 'He could see, he could see, he could see.' Do you see?

'Who do people say I am?'

OK, we get it – but why would Mark want to tell us this? The clue is in the verses either side of this miracle.

Last week, we saw how the disciples *really* didn't understand what Jesus was on about. The conversation ends with an exasperated Jesus asking (21), **'Do you still not understand?'**

Immediately *after* this miracle Jesus asks his disciples (27), **'Who do people say I am?'** He wasn't acting like a z-list celebrity yelling at an unimpressed cab driver, 'Don't you know who I am?' ¶

For some time now, Jesus had been feeding and teaching the crowds, healing the sick, calming storms. He wanted to know if anyone – *anyone* – understood who he was; he wanted to know if anyone could *see*. His question isn't arrogance, it's sad.

Because the disciples' answer was, effectively, 'No.'

'Some say John the Baptist,' they replied (28), **'others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.'**

What did they mean? Some people thought – like Herod Antipas in chapter 6 – that Jesus was **John the Baptist** raised from the dead. Except, their ministries overlapped!

Maybe it's a bit like **J** Clark Kent / Superman: 'they don't look alike... do they?' 'Well, have you ever seen them both at the same time?' Except in this case... yes! (See John 1.29-36.)

Elijah? The last prophet was Malachi whose last words were:

J 'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.'

Malachi 4.5-6 (NIV)

Maybe they had this from Deuteronomy in mind:

J [Moses said,] ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.’

Deuteronomy 18.15 (NIV)

The people looked at Jesus and connected him with something big: the story of God and his people Israel. They looked at Jesus and saw not something brand new but a continuation of a story that had been unfolding for hundreds and thousands of years.

The people’s guesses were not right – Jesus was not **John the Baptist, Elijah**, nor **one of the prophets** – but neither were they entirely wrong. Jesus *is* part of that bigger story. Sometimes Christians act as though the Bible starts on page 965: Matthew 1.1 in our church Bibles, the start of the New Testament.

But *that* verse connects Jesus with what has gone before: **the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham** (Matthew 1.1). The Old Testament points and leads to Jesus: he is the one longed for and promised by the prophets, he is *God himself* come to finish what he started. So we can’t truly understand who Jesus is, if we ignore the Old Testament.

And so, having spent a few months reading through Mark's gospel thinking about the question, 'Who is Jesus?' our next series is an overview of the Old Testament. I pray it will help us flesh out the picture of Jesus we have built up from Mark.

More about that when we start it in two weeks' time. For now, back to Mark...

As we said, the people weren't *entirely* wrong. They could see Jesus was special – that was obvious – so they assumed he was something to do with these ancient prophecies. But they had no clue who he *really* was. They had seen him perform miracles, feed thousands, teach with authority, cast out demons – they had seen all that, but they couldn't really *see*.

They were exactly like the blind man who said he could (24) **‘See people; they look like trees walking around.’**

It is possible to 'see' Jesus, without really *seeing* – without seeing *who he really is*. That is why this series on Mark – we are now in week 21 – is called, 'Who is Jesus?' Mark wrote his gospel, his answer to that question, because he wants us to *see* who Jesus is.

And that's why Jesus' next question is so important: **‘What about you?’** Jesus asked (29), **‘Who do you say I am?’**

I've told before the story of how I proposed to Jess. It was outside her university house on Rachel Gardens right there in Selly Oak. We were on the driveway – so romantic – when I pulled out the ring, went down on one knee and asked, 'Will you marry me?' (Or words to that effect.)

That is a really important question. (She said 'Yes' by the way!)

But *this* question [point to screen](#) is *much* more important. First, it's a question that is for everyone: not only for one person like me asking Jess to marry me; not only for the disciples back then... it's for *everyone*. Second, it has even bigger consequences. Getting married is a decision that should last a lifetime – sadly it doesn't always – but the answer to *this* question has *eternal* consequences.

'What about you?' Jesus asked, **'Who do you say I am?'** *Pause*

Miracle

Like the reading did, we're going to end there, with a couple of things I'd like you to do this week.

The first is to prepare for next week's Explore service. We will be exploring our answers to this vital question [point to the screen](#) – so those of you who are introverts have no excuse: I'm giving you an entire week to think about it!

The second is to pray. To see who Jesus is, we have to look. To be able to look, we have to be able to see – yet each of us is born spiritually blind. It is possible to read all of Mark – even the entire Bible – and not get it. Like the **blind man in Bethsaida** (22) we all need a miracle to see and understand who Jesus is.

So this week I'd like you to pray. You might pray for a loved one, a friend or family member who doesn't yet know Jesus. Pray for a miracle. Pray God would open the eyes of the blind, pray God would help them see and understand who Jesus is. And pray for an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus.

Or you might pray for yourself. Perhaps you don't know Jesus at all and want to. Perhaps you realise you're like the blind man who could **see people** that **look like trees**, like the people who thought Jesus was **one of the prophets**: you aren't *entirely* wrong but you don't *really* see who Jesus is. You realise you need a miracle.

It doesn't need complicated words, simply a heartfelt request, like those who **begged Jesus** to heal their friend (22): 'Jesus please open my eyes: help me see you and know you.' It's pretty simple, but it will change your life. Do you see? Do you *want* to see?

¹ See <http://hoaxes.org/aprilfool/P10>.