

Seeing clearly

Mark 8:22-30 - Littlebourne September 5th 2021

We read last week about Jesus feeding the four thousand and then his talking about the leaven of the Pharisees to the disciples. This ended with Jesus sounding rather exasperated at them, verses 17-21:

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

We're at a point when the disciples still are having difficulty understanding Jesus. In today's passage, they get closer to understanding.

We've seen a lot of repetition in Mark. Not only are we seeing yet another healing, but chapter 8 up to verse 30 forms a sort of mirror to what happens in the end of chapter 6 and all of 7. Jesus feeds a multitude and crosses the sea of Galilee, there's conflict with the Pharisees and Jesus talks about bread in ways the disciples don't understand, then he heals someone in an unusual way and then there is a confession of faith. We're looking at the healing and confession of faith at the end of this cycle of events. Why is it that almost the same things are being done again? Because the disciples are not seeing clearly - they need to see these events more than once to see things more clearly. At the end of chapter 7, the people said "He does all things well". True enough and an expression of faith, but Jesus is looking for something more concrete from his disciples.

Back when Jesus sent the disciples ahead in the boat in chapter 6, they were intending to go to Bethsaida, but didn't. Now they are taking the opportunity to visit there and we read of this healing event that, like the dead and mute man two weeks ago, is only recorded in Mark's gospel.

v22-26

22 And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 23 And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" 24 And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." 25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

Very similar situation to what we saw at the end of Chapter 7. Again, people want Jesus to touch the person. This person has people that care about him. Again, it's not the immediate touch that heals - Jesus leads this man by the hand before healing him. Just as with the deaf and mute man that was healed, Jesus heals in a strange way and it's more than just the touch that does it.

But unlike the deaf and mute man's healing, which we saw was an instantaneous healing, this healing is gradual. This is the only healing in the gospels that has this gradual element to it - the intermediate stage where things are better, but not yet fully clear.

Again, there is no special symbolism to the method used, but Jesus uses different methods for different people - he looks at people as individuals. The different methods - Jesus never heals a blind person quite the same way twice - shows us that the method is not the important thing. It's the power of God that heals, not some incantation or ritual.

God's power to heal is used differently in different situations - sometimes people need to be changed immediately, sometimes gradually.

The literal unstopping of ears, the literal opening of eyes was required to hear Jesus' words and see him clearly as he is. Few of us see clearly at first, certainly we've seen the disciples not yet understand things properly, not yet see clearly who Jesus is. Now they are getting a bit closer.

Nowhere else in the gospels is the healing Jesus gives not instantaneous. Why in this case is it gradual? Mark doesn't explain this, but it seems that it fits in neatly between these two cases of the disciples failing to see clearly and the next section, where they do see more clearly than before. Jesus heals in this manner possibly to illustrate to us the gradual opening of the eyes of his disciples.

v27-28

27 And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."

So Jesus and his disciples travel some more, going north from Bethsaida. As they are travelling, he asks "Who do people say that I am"?

So some thought Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected - remember we read about John the baptist's death in chapter 6 and saw that this was King Herod's theory about Jesus.

Others say he was Elijah - Elijah the Old Testament prophet, who was whisked up into heaven rather than dying an ordinary death and was prophesised to come before the return of the Messiah. Or he is said to be a continuation of the long line of prophets, like Elijah and others, that have spanned the Old Testament history of Israel, or at least to be something like them in power or authority.

John, Elijah, just another prophet - all these make Jesus out to be someone powerful, coming with authority, but a preparatory figure, rather than he who finalises the story, he who achieves salvation. These are answers like intermediate stage of the blind man's healing - there's the general shape and the impression of who Jesus is, but not the full clear image.

Jesus' own family are not sure of him in chapter 3 verse 21. In chapter 3 verse 22, the Pharisees say he is casting out demons by the power of beelzebub - they put him in the same category as satan and demons. Jesus will continue to be mocked and not believed to be the Christ right up until his death - see Mark 15:31-32.

The closest anyone has really got to seeing Jesus clearly, so far, are the demons in Mark 5 (verse 7) who says:

What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?

We saw God the Father speak down from heaven at Jesus' baptism, in our first week of Mark, confirming this to be a correct assessment of who Jesus is.

There were a variety of opinions about Jesus back then. So too today, many don't see Jesus clearly for who he is, even who he says he is.

People sometimes think Jesus is just a prophet or a wise teacher or a good moral person, but that's not a very viable option in light of all that Jesus shows us of himself. You might have heard the formulation: Lunatic, Liar or Lord? Mad, Bad or God?

C S Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* says this:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.

Jesus is well aware of what the world says about him - he wants the disciples to see clearly who he is.

v29

29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ."

So far, only God and demons have got this question right. After a long process of revealing more about himself, after the disciples consistently get things wrong and don't understand what's going on, finally Peter gets the right answer and is showing more understanding.

Peter calls Jesus the Christ. It's a title we have not seen since the very first verse of Mark. We've seen lots of remarkable things since chapter 1 verse 1, but no other recognition that Jesus is the Christ, until now.

Christ means the messiah, the anointed one. The messiah was the one who would lead Israel as King, being a descendent of David, saving them.

But saving them from what? The common conception, then as well as today for Jews, is that the messiah is one who leads politically, who commands an earthly kingdom, who frees people from earthly oppressions and enemies. People are expecting a man that will lead the revolt against the romans. At this stage in Mark, Jesus is by that standard not very messiah like - poor, low status, no wealth or political power.

But Jesus is not messiah in the way people expected him to be - he must, as the next section of Mark tells us, suffer and be put to death in order to fulfil his messianic role. He is not saving people from the romans, or from any other conquering earthly power, but from the much deeper problem we all face - our sin.

When we get to chapter 14 (verses 61-62), Jesus is asked if he is the Christ by the high priest, and says yes. But the high priest says that this is blasphemy. Jesus was not at all what Jewish people were expecting.

Next week, we'll see Peter doesn't yet understand this - he's in the mindset of the Messiah being one who is powerful and conquering in an earthly way. In verse 32, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he will be put to death. Peter's confession of Jesus' Messiahship is not totally clear sighted, but it's much closer than before.

v30

30 And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Why keep it a secret at this stage? Because people expected something very different from the messiah - they are looking at messiah in a political sense. The full story is not yet revealed.

The disciples still aren't completely clear - Jesus' identity, his role as the messiah is still unfolding and we'll read about this more next week. He doesn't want them spreading the wrong idea.

His mission then was not yet complete. But now that the battle against sin has been won, he is now revealed in fullness through scripture and by the work of the Spirit. And his parting message is to tell everyone - the great commission given to his disciples.

Conclusion

There's not a specific way that Jesus reveals himself, not a specific way that he heals. Jesus doesn't always fit our preconceptions. I don't think there was a specific point that I can see that was a breakthrough moment in my understanding about Jesus, it's been gradual. For others, they found Jesus in an instant and something big changed very quickly. Jesus works in different ways, tailored to the individual. "I didn't have a life changing experience like that other person, I must be missing out or not saved or in some way deficient." - not so. Experience is not what saves, but grace. It's the supernatural healing power of God that opens the eyes of sinners to see him as he is.

We are, like the disciples, often not seeing Jesus clearly. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians (13 verse 12):

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

We don't see things in their fullness or as clearly as we ought. But we look forward to seeing Jesus and knowing Jesus fully.

Peter will later deny Jesus at a crucial moment, as we'll later see in chapter 14. He'll deny that he ever knew Jesus, even after having been the first here to recognise Jesus is the Christ. Consistency on our part is thankfully not the requirement for salvation. Jesus is consistent, that's what gives us assurance. We're saved by grace, not by the clarity with which we see the truth, though we should seek to see Jesus more clearly.

Are we seeking Jesus, spending time with him to get to know him better? The disciples took a long time and many miracles to see Jesus even partially clearly. We should spend plenty of time with Jesus, in prayer and worship, to improve our understanding of who Jesus is and improve our relationship with him.

Be born again, but don't remain a spiritual baby - 1 Peter 2:2

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation

2 Peter 3:18

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.