

Jesus' care for his own

Mark 6 v 45-56 - July 1st 2021 - Littlebourne

Parallel Passages: Matthew 14:22-36, John 6:15-25

Throughout Mark's gospel we've looked at Jesus being human and divine - his humanity expressed in more than just his bodily form, but in his temptation, his prayer life, his need for sleep. His deity, his being God himself come to earth, has been seen in the Father speaking from heaven, in his miracles, his ability to heal, to command nature and his forgiving of sins.

It seems quite obvious at this stage, that Jesus is far more than just a prophet or a powerful man. There's something very different about him, unlike anyone else in scripture or indeed the world. But those closest to him, still don't have a clear picture of him. After everything they've seen they are still continually surprised and amazed by him.

Last week we heard about the feeding the five thousand, as Jesus miraculously multiplies the loaves and fishes. This passage comes right after that, as the last crumbs are still being eaten. We start off with Mark's favourite word - immediately.

v45-46

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Immediately after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus makes his disciples get in the boat and leave him behind. You can imagine that the disciples were maybe perplexed by this, but they comply. How was Jesus going to join them again, or what was Jesus to have them do once they'd crossed the sea? They leave Jesus as he's dismissing the crowd - they must be wondering what Jesus wants to do being left in what verse 32 describes as a desolate place, as night is approaching.

Well we see what Jesus wants to do - he wants to be alone with God, to pray in solitude. This is something we've seen before - in chapter 1, Jesus goes to a solitary place to pray following his busy day of healing in Capernaum. Both there in chapter 1 and here, we see the importance that Jesus gives to prayer. After important events, he prays and we'll see,

perhaps most obviously in the garden of Gethsemane in chapter 14, that he prays before important events too.

Both here and in chapter 1, Jesus prays whilst it is dark - he forgoes sleep in order to pray. Jesus in his humanity going to pray to his Father in heaven and he counts this so important that he will take the time to go to a solitary place to pray alone - alone that is in human terms, but in closer communication with God.

Now maybe the most obvious thing to take from this is that we should take Jesus' life on earth as our example - that we too should spend time, as a priority, in communion with God through prayer.

But Jesus' life on earth is not the only place that Jesus prays. Christ, in his humanity, has communion with God not just for that thirty odd years, but continually. Jesus is praying now - and not just in the abstract, but for us, his body the church and all who are members of it through their union with him.

Hebrews 7 tells us of Christ's office as the perfect High Priest, of his abiding, permanent priesthood. He is the perfect priest, the perfect mediator between God and man. Verse 25 says this:

*he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, **since he always lives to make intercession for them.***

We spend a lot of time looking at what Jesus did 'back then'. His life, his death, his resurrection. All of this is extremely valuable and needs to be looked at in detail, but we often neglect to think about what Christ is doing now. After his ascension into heaven, it's tempting to think that it's all over, Jesus has accomplished his mission, now he's in heaven with his feet up until he returns to earth later. But this verse in Hebrews says that his care for us, his interceding for us, does not stop. He *always* lives to make intercession for us.

Jesus' prayer life is not relegated to this mountaintop, or even to his life on earth, but continues throughout all time - his heart for us never grows cold, he is always interceding for us.

v47-48a

*47 And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.
48 And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.*

So Jesus can see them from where he is, see them struggling. The NIV says 'straining at the oars'. The ESV translates it as 'making headway painfully'. The key word is βασανίζω (basanizō), which means torture or torment. We've seen this used before in Mark 5 verse 7, where the demon possessed man says:

What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.

The disciples aren't just tired, aren't just exhausted, they're in pain, tortured by their struggle with the oars against the wind.

At least four of these people are fishermen from Galilee. They know sailing, these waters in particular. They know what they are doing, yet they are not getting anywhere.

This isn't a great storm like last time we saw these disciples having trouble on the sea. This is an opposing wind, rather than heavy rain and storm that threatened to flood the boat. It is dark, and the wind will have whipped up waves. Nevertheless, Jesus can see them from where he is on the mountain.

They set out earlier in the night - when evening came. They are sailing, or rather rowing, throughout the night, until the fourth watch of the night. Since the Romans divided the night into four periods, the fourth watch would be the three hours ending at dawn. That is, between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m or thereabouts. So it was getting on for sunrise before Jesus came to them.

Notice that Jesus doesn't just calm the storm from where he is on dry land. He was surely capable of this, but he comes out to sea to the suffering disciples himself, to comfort them directly and be in their suffering with them.

v48b - 50a

He meant to pass by them, 49 but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, 50 for they all saw him and were terrified.

Now this is odd - different translations render this first phrase "he wanted or wished" to pass by them or "he was about to or ready to" pass by them. Either are valid translations, but this can be a little perplexing, because it's a weird phrase for Mark to have used.

Well, the best explanation of this I've found is that this is imitating the language of the Septuagint in Exodus 33 verses 19 and 22, the occasion when the LORD passes before Moses, revealing his glory. Likewise here, God's glory is being revealed to the disciples in Jesus Christ - this is showing us that none other than God is approaching the boat.

The disciples as soon as they saw him, didn't recognise him.

Remember that we've seen the disciples have a trip out on the sea in a storm not long ago. They had Jesus with them that time, and they saw the way he calmed the storm completely and immediately. They saw that he was able to stop the wind and waves with just his command. This time, maybe they wish that Jesus was with them, to do the same. And there he appears, and they can't believe it.

They think he's a ghost, a phantom or the word can even be translated demon. Whatever they saw was frightening.

Until he reveals himself to them, they do not recognise him.

v50b - 52

But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." 51 And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

He immediately speaks to remove their terror - he won't let them be terrified longer than required. What he says is important, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." His immediate response is to comfort and encourage his disciples.

That phrase, rendered 'it is I' is in greek ἐγώ εἰμι (ey-go ey-me). ἐγώ means I am. εἰμι means I am. Both of these words are different ways of saying 'I am', but this is for good reason - it's not just Jesus saying 'it's me'.

In the greek Old Testament translation that would have been available at the time, the Septuagint, this is the same written phrase as the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 (verse 14):

God said to Moses, "I am who I am."

It's no mistake that Mark has rendered this in the same way. Jesus' divine power is revealed once again in his walking on water and calming the wind once again.

He assures them with his word, firstly. Jesus says 'do not be afraid' before he gets in the boat, before the wind is calmed. His very word should be enough to set the disciples at rest, to know that things will be all right.

He then assures them with his presence too - he gets in the boat with them and at this point the wind ceases. All is well.

Why did the disciples not recognise Jesus? Why did they think him a ghost?

Firstly the disciples are astounded - they don't expect this to be possible or for Jesus to have this sort of ability. Just like last time Jesus got them out of a bind on the water, they don't expect him to be able to help.

The disciples had abundant evidence that Christ possessed divine power, they had seen the miracle before this with their own eyes, Jesus had even had them collect enough food for themselves as a result of that miracle, but this now astounds them, it says, because their hearts were hardened.

Hardened - *πωρόω* (*por-oo-o*), derived from *poros*, a kind of marble. Meaning hardened, figuratively made of stone, dull, calloused, unresponsive. We see this word again in Mark 8 v 17, when the disciples are discussing that they have no bread after Jesus has warned them about the leaven of the pharisees. A case of them not getting it, just as in this instance.

Mark says they didn't understand about the loaves, they didn't see the significance of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Their hearts were hardened. They aren't the only ones with hardened hearts - we've seen in chapter 3 verse 5, Jesus says that the Pharisees have hardened hearts, as he does in chapter 10 verse 5.

v53-56

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. 54 And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him 55 and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

Jesus and the disciples land at Gennesaret. This is some distance from Bathsaida where they were headed. Gennesaret is not that far from Capernaum, where Jesus has become well known, so people are recognising him and word is spreading that he's there. How many would have heard about the healing of the paralytic that we saw in chapter 2 or all those others that were healed in Capernaum in chapter 1? Does the inclusion of the detail that people wanted to just touch his garment mean that word had spread about the woman with the bleeding issue from chapter 5?

It's a familiar scene that we've seen from Mark throughout - people flocking to Jesus, that they might just get close and be healed.

So many people are flocking to Jesus for their bodily, physical healing, but we see from the disciples that more than the physical is required. Jesus can indeed save them from the physical danger, the bodily painfulness, but that's not their real problem. They need healing from their hardness of heart, their unbelief, their failure to recognise Jesus' saving power.

Conclusion

The good news is that the hardheartedness of the disciples is no barrier to Jesus' help. Christ's concern for them, and for us, is not predicated on whether we are doing the right thing or following him the right way - his concern for us doesn't waver based on our actions. Indeed, in spite of our actions, he cares for us.

Romans 5 verse 8:

▮ *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

While we were still actively in rebellion against God, while we were still rejecting him, while our hearts were hardened like stone, Christ died for us. His love for us is not dependent on how our hearts respond.

But what about our hardened hearts? How are we to change our soften our hearts?

Ezekiel 36 v 26:

▮ *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

God himself softens the hardhearted - Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to work within us and soften our hearts, to transform us and renew us and turn dead hearts of stone to live hearts of flesh.

But not just that we are given new life, but new life in him - in Christ. We form part of his body:

1 Corinthians 12 verse 27:

▮ *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

Those of us who are in Christ, members of his body, are today more close to him than those who saw and touched him on earth. We are inextricably united with him. He cares for us as he would for his very own body.

When part of your body is injured or broken, you doesn't amputate at the first opportunity - rather, you tend and care for those broken parts. Our sin and hardheartedness is injury to Christ himself, and his heart for us is to heal and make clean our injured selves.

In the same way that Jesus is looking down from that mountain at the struggling disciples and praying for them, interceding for them, so too let us be confident that Christ is, right now and continually, interceding for us, bringing our case before the Father, expressing his care for us as for his very own body of which we are a part.

We may feel like we are the disciples in the boat, making no headway, the winds against us. But know that Jesus Christ sees our suffering, understands it and feels it himself and at the right time, will come to bring it to an end.