

**Sermon, Leith Valley, Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March**  
**Reading: Mark 8:1-26**

**Jesus and his failing disciples**

Paul Trebilco

Firstly, we'll watch the feeding of the 5000 from Mark 6:30-44 – from the Jesus video [or please read the passage].

Then against this background, let's hear Mark 8:1-26.

How do we react to the disciples at this point?

They have experienced a miracle of epic proportions in Mark 6 – 5000 men, plus families – perhaps 10,000 people in total – have been fed, after Jesus took five loaves and two fish and gave thanks to God. Then, in Mark 6-7 Mark tells us of a number of other miracles they witness - Jesus walking on water, healing the sick, healing the Syrophenician woman's daughter, healing a deaf man.

And then comes Mark 8. Again there's a great crowd. Jesus calls his disciples and says (v2-3) "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way – and some of them have come from a great distance."

The caring, loving, compassionate Jesus. And note this is a crisis – they've been with him for three days and so well and truly run out of food.

And how do the disciples reply?

v4: "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?"

How does this question strike you? TALK with your neighbour.

So the disciples do not come out of this very well. Somehow – they have not remembered what happened last time when Jesus fed the 5000.

Back in Mk 6, they had asked Jesus how they could possibly feed all these people – "are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them?" The question was reasonable then. But now in Mark 8, the question - "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" is not so reasonable. They have *seen* Jesus feed the 5000! They've seen his miraculous power at work in exactly this situation! But they repeat their scornful question! It sounds like the reaction of people who have never witnessed anything done by Jesus. One commentator writes of the disciples "truly monumental stupidity"! A bit harsh perhaps! But close!

But Jesus is *undeterred* by their forgetfulness, their lack of faith and their failure. He simply asked them how many loaves they have – 7 – and, as in Mark 6, he gave thanks, broke them and gave them *to his disciples to distribute*. He does the same with "a few small fish" and again the disciples distribute them to the crowds.

So the disciples, despite their slowness, are key agents in this miracle – and somehow a miracle of multiplication occurs and the crowd “ate and were filled”. Again there is much left over - seven baskets full. And we are told that 4000 people had been fed. Jesus is the patient one who continues to feed his people in the wilderness.

We pick up the story in v14.

The disciples are crossing the lake again – v13 – and the disciples’ stomachs are rumbling – they had forgotten to bring any bread - they’ve only got one loaf. They seem to be worried by this.

Jesus is obviously aware of what is going on and addresses them - “Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” He means the influence of the Pharisees and of Herod – just as yeast permeates flour, so the Pharisees and Herod can have substantial impact.

But the disciples are confused – They think Jesus is saying this “because we have no bread.” They completely misunderstand.

Jesus – knowing their misunderstanding – addresses them v17-21:

<sup>17</sup> And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you *still* not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? <sup>18</sup> Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? <sup>19</sup> When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” <sup>20</sup> “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.” <sup>21</sup> Then he said to them, “Do you *not yet* understand?”

Do you get the tone of exasperation in Jesus’ voice! He’s tired out by this lot. Oh that they might understand!

Are your hearts hardened? he asks. This is serious stuff. The archetypal hardened heart in the OT belonged to ... Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened against all that God was doing in seeking to liberate the people of Israel. So a hardened heart is something to be worried about! Of course they have eyes – but they are lacking in perception, in insight. Of course they have ears – but they are lacking in understanding, in comprehension.

And so Jesus rehearses what happened with the 5000 and then with the 4000 – and all that was left over.

Then he added, “Do you *not yet* understand?”

I might say that it’s a bit like the coach of a sport’s team – where the coach had been talking and talking to them about various improvements that she wanted to see – but the team was impervious to instruction and simply did not get it. Perhaps the sort of thing the coach of the Highlanders might be saying after they lost yet again – to the Chiefs last night. Don’t you guys get it yet!!!

And so see what happens next.

Mark could have written this next:

“And Jesus abandoned the twelve and left them to wander – alone - in the deserted place. And when Jesus arrived back in Capernaum by himself, he found another twelve. And calling to Bruce he said, “Follow me”. And calling to Trevor he said “Follow me”.”

That is exactly what Jesus does *not* do.

What happens? And why. Look at v22-25.

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. <sup>23</sup> He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” <sup>24</sup> And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” <sup>25</sup> Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

So what is the point?

Who has been blind?

And why is it a two-stage miracle. Well it happened like that. But it is the only two-stage miracle in the Gospel. The disciples *have* had a touch from Jesus – they do see some things. They see enough to follow – they understand enough to be in the boat with Jesus.

But they do not see clearly. They need further healing.

But Jesus can deal with blindness!!! Jesus can bring sight. Jesus can lay his hands on people so they can see!

And note the story before the feeding of the 4000!

Mark 7:31-37 – at the bottom of the handout.

Jesus can deal with deafness too.

Now clearly these were miracles that *happened* – real people were healed, real deafness and real blindness was transformed into hearing and sight.

But Mark *also* wants to say that Jesus can bring spiritual sight and spiritual hearing – for this is what the disciples so-ooo need.

So Mark has *surrounded* his story about the spiritual blindness and deafness of the disciples – in the feeding of the 4000 and when they misunderstand about the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod - with Jesus healing deafness and blindness.

*I* seem to regularly be both blind and deaf. I miss things of spiritual significance.

I am unmoved by people’s plight at times – when I know I should see and perceive. I do or say something – and later on think – how blind I was to do that!

I think it is easy for us to *grow* blind and heard of hearing – a bit like the aging process!!

Where once we were attentive to Jesus’ voice – and obeyed – now it sometimes seems harder! Or where we were once seeing and perceiving, we make things complicated and involved. When Jesus wants us simply to see and to hear.

Its easy to be critical of these disciples. But I think we are very like them!! We too, at time, are blind! and deaf! But Jesus can deal with this!!!

A short caveat here:

In some ways *we are better off* than these first disciples!! Note what Jesus says in 8:21: Then he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?” The implication is that at some point they will understand. Jesus’ death and resurrection is clearly crucial in this – you do not yet understand – but soon you will see more! After the resurrection.

We can see the whole story – the whole of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It makes a great difference – its so much easier to understand in view of the whole.

*But* we also have the Spirit. In John 14:26 we read: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” The Spirit guides, leads, provokes us.

BUT, in some ways we are still not too different from those first disciples. Yes, we can see the whole story of Jesus; yes we have the Holy Spirit. But in 1 Cor 13:12 Paul, writing after the resurrection, after the coming of the Spirit in this: “For *now* we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

The Christians Paul writes to in Corinth and Galatia could well be described as hard of hearing at times, and dim in sight.

And that’s certainly me. These conditions do afflict us – until Christ’s return makes us completely whole!

But the good news is that Jesus *can deal with deafness and blindness*.

Think back about the story of the 4000.

In Mark 8: 2 Jesus talks of his compassion and in a sense challenges the disciples – challenges them to have the faith that Jesus can feed these people – as he did two chapters earlier with the 5000.

The disciples *fail* the test - <sup>4</sup> His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

Yet Jesus seeks to elicit faith in them. v5 “How many loaves do you have?” Seven loaves, a few small fish.

It is enough Jesus says. Jesus can work with just this little.

And so, even though the disciples do not respond with great faith, Jesus does the miracle – and feeds the 4000 - **not** *because* of the disciples’ faith, but because that is what Jesus is like!! Jesus is the one who longs to bless and multiply.

A tiny offering is brought to Jesus - Seven loaves, a few small fish.

Those who offer are *not* full of faith. They have just enough faith to bother to bring this to Jesus.

But it is enough!

Jesus does not require us to come in strong, vibrant faith.

Coming exhausted and worn out is just fine.

Coming not with a huge banquet – but just seven loaves, a few small fish for 4000 people – that is enough!

Coming in the midst of misunderstanding and confusion, failure and trouble – that is fine too! All that matters is coming ...

And Jesus does the miracle!

Jesus never fails the failing disciples. Jesus understands the fragility of our human response. Jesus perseveres with these disciples and does not seek to replace them! He never abandons this fragile lot! As Matthew puts it in Mt 12:20, Jesus “will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.”

As one commentator writes, “The light in the darkness of their failure is the never failing presence of Jesus to his fragile disciple”.

Jesus does the miracle for these disciples! And they are even key agents in the miracle – as they distribute the food! Even in their failure and slowness to understand they are used by Jesus to bring about the miracle! Even in their failure they are vessels of blessing for others.

In just the same way, Jesus brings the miracle of hearing and sight – for all of us whose hearts can be dangerously close to hardened, whose ears have grown hard of hearing, whose eyes have become dimmed. And in just the same way, we – in our confusion – can be agents of blessing.

Jesus – the gracious Lord, the Giver – is in the business of giving to his Church – giving bountifully, restoring, transforming and giving new life. He can deal with our blindness and deafness. And all he asks is that we come - just as we are!

Amen