

Leith Valley Sermon, Sunday 8 October.
Mark 8:1-10

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I want to start before our reading – in Mark 6. Consider this story.

This is an amazing story. The disciples are concerned for the crowds – we’re out in a deserted place and all these crowds have come here quite spontaneously – and haven't brought food with them. So the disciples suggest that Jesus should send them away to get some food before they go and die on us. A very reasonable suggestion.

But Jesus has other plans. “You give them something to eat.” Whooh! You must be kidding. It would take 200 days wages to feed all these people! What’s that – \$25,000!

But then Jesus takes command – “How many loaves have you? Go and see.”

And Jesus feeds the multitude – 5000 people. An amazing miracle of God’s provision through Jesus.

Then let’s skip forward to chapter 8 – our reading.

We have the same situation – this time they’ve been with Jesus for three days – and so have well and truly run out of food. Jesus explains in v3: 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. So the implication? ‘Give these poor people something to eat!’

How then do we read the disciples response in v4: His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

Now how do we react to this question?

There are not very many indications of time in Mark 6-8 – but not much time has elapsed since the feeding of the 5000.

So the question is – why do the disciples react like this? slow, lacking in understanding, faithless, abysmal ...?

In fact Mark has a very careful portrayal of the disciples. Look at all the positive things said about them:

- **Positive Features**
- Follow Jesus immediately (1:16-20); 2:13, 15
- Discipleship is ‘to be with Jesus’ (3:14) and they are ...
- Given authority to preach and cast out demons (3:14-15)
- Disciples are Jesus’ true family (3:31-35)

- Receive explanation of parables and secrets of the Kingdom (4:11, 33-34)
- Sent on mission and succeed and so share Jesus' ministry (6:7-13, 30)
- Receive further instruction (7:17; 9:33; 10:10)

But look at the negative things too:

Negative Features

- Don't understand (4:13; 6:51-52; 10:13-16, 23-27)
- Afraid on the sea – have no faith (4:38-41)
- Think Jesus is a ghost (6:47-52)
- Haven't learned from the first feeding miracle (8:4; cf 6:37)
- Don't understand about bread (8:14-21)
- Hearts are hardened (8:17); eyes fail to see, ears fail to hear (8:18)
- 'Get behind me Satan' – to Peter (8:33)
- Aren't able to heal and are called 'Faithless generation' (9:18-19)
- Concerned about status and greatness (9:33-37)
- Try to stop exorcist who wasn't with them (9:38-41)
- Try to stop children coming to Jesus (10:13-14) when Jesus had said about welcoming children (9:36-37)
- Don't understand about servanthood, but rather want greatness (10:35-45)
- Judas betrays Jesus (14:10)
- Peter is certain he won't deny Jesus (14:29-31) but does (14:66-72)
- Fall asleep in the garden at Jesus' time of need (14:32-42)
- All desert Jesus (14:50), except the women (15:40-41) but at the end even the women are afraid (16:8)

So this is a really, really mixed portrait. The slowness of the disciples in Mark 8:4 is all of a piece with the problems they have many times over. They are given amazing privileges – and are with Jesus the whole time. But they still get it wrong, they still make big mistakes, they don't get it ...

In fact the disciples are rather like me. Or perhaps I should say, I'm rather like the disciples. I misunderstand. I get it wrong. I'm fearful, unbelieving ... slow. I get tripped up.

-BUT look again at the feeding of the 4000. How exactly does it happen?

Kristin – just staying there with Jesus is enough!

How does it happen? Through the disciples. They are incredulous that Jesus might even think that they can do something about the crowds hunger – “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” They don't get it. And yet Jesus still uses them! They are the vehicle of the miracle. They are instrumental in the multiplication. We don't know how it happened – but they are involved.

It's not about them. It's about Jesus. And he doesn't use them because – but in spite of. The miracle doesn't happen *because* they've got it all sorted out, have it all sussed. It happens *despite* the fact that they have this unbelieving attitude. That they don't get it. They are with Jesus – and that is enough! They simply stay with Jesus. And he uses them in spite of ...

And Mark is also saying that discipleship is *not* an easy thing. It's not about perfection. It's about fallible followers. About disciples who get it wrong, who are slow and have lots of foibles. And that's OK. Jesus wants us to grow – but he knows we will still get it wrong. Its enough that we stay with Jesus.

It's about Jesus doing things through his disciples – not *because* they are great people – but *despite* them not being great people. They are fallible and get it wrong – but nonetheless Jesus uses them! Phew! All we need to do is stay beside Jesus.

So this portrait of the disciples is to be really, really encouraging. Discipleship isn't easy – it never has been. Its not about being strong, or right, or fast. Its about being with Jesus.

Imagine another scenario. The disciples say, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

Jesus says. ‘That's it! I've had enough of you lot – I'm going to go and get some more disciples and try again!’

No, Jesus doesn't abandon them! He stays with them.

Look even at Mark 8:17-22. Do you not yet understand!
But even here Jesus' aim is to get them to understand!
And does he consign them to the rubbish heap? No!!

They are his – and he sticks with them. And uses them still!

But there's another side to it too.

This is all before Jesus' death and resurrection. There's one indication that things will be better after Easter day.

After the transfiguration we read this:

Mark 9:9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

We are in a better situation to understand and to follow than those disciples who spent three years with Jesus. We can see the full picture – from the beginning to Jesus' death and resurrection. The parts make sense in light of the whole. We can see things that they

could not. Ever thought how wonderful it would be to be with Jesus. Yes of course! But we can see things that the disciples did not see! *And* we have the Holy Spirit – the gift of the risen Jesus – to help us understand, to follow.

But Mark's portrait of the disciples remains. Does Mark think that we'll be perfect? No. His portrait of discipleship shows that he believes disciples are a work-in-progress ... and get it wrong.

BUT the Gospel is that Jesus doesn't scrap his call to us and start again! Jesus stays with us! And like those disciples, he can use us to do amazing things – not because of us, but in spite of us. We make mistakes – but nevertheless Jesus uses us! He calls us to stay with him – to not give up on ourselves – to simply be his people, and he will look after the rest.

To him be the glory

Amen