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Sermon
Two Stage Revelation
Mark 8:27-38
16/9/18

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We've just heard the gospel reading – I'd like to draw back from the detail at first and look at the larger picture in this eighth chapter of Mark.

Through the chapter there is a pattern of Jesus asking his disciples a question repeatedly and eventually getting an answer from them. There is a pattern of blindness, partial sight and finally good sight being achieved.

Mark 8 starts with the feeding of the 4000. This is a distinct event from the feeding of the 5000 we looked at recently. Once again, Jesus is teaching in a remote place and the crowd need feeding. Jesus asked the disciples repeatedly how many loaves they had. (How do I know it was repeatedly? Because the Greek verb is in the imperfect tense which is used for repeated or continuing actions in the past.) Was he trying to remind them of the miracle with the 5000 people – perhaps to prompt some faith or understanding? They finally answer 7 loaves. He takes the bread and some fish and feeds 4000 people.

Disciples don't seem particularly impacted by this. There follows an encounter in verse 11-12 with some Pharisees who ask for a sign that they might believe in him. What more do they want? Jesus refuses to perform for those who are refusing to believe what they have seen.

As they cross over the lake, Jesus was warning them to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees – their hypocrisy. The disciples misunderstood and started arguing amongst themselves that he said it because they only brought one loaf of bread with them. Jesus tells them they have got it wrong. He goes over two miracles of feeding the 5000 and the 4000 and how much bread was left over. He tells them they are blind, deaf and hard of heart. Repeatedly (imperfect tense) he says to them, "Do you still not understand?"

How is it someone does not understand? Because they have not seen or heard or refuse to believe or understand the evidence presented to them – blind, deaf or with a hardened heart.

The Blind Man

Then comes the healing of the blind man. It reads as if there was a simple two stage healing.

Actually Jesus laid hands on him once, then he was asking (imperfect tense) "What do you see?" And the man was saying (also imperfect tense), "I see men like trees walking." If both the question and the answer were said repeatedly, there must have been a time of waiting, of checking for progress. There was partial healing but not yet clear sight.

Then Jesus laid hands on him again and he saw clearly. He told the man not to tell people.

You may remember on our last trip to Kondo, Helen and I were teaching in the village of Nante with John Bei (who visited us here last year) translating.

We met a blind man called Samuel who had not seen from birth. Two other people confirmed that was true. We prayed for his sight once and asked how it was - there was no change.

I said to John to encourage him and myself, "Remember the healing of the Blind Man in Mark 8." We prayed again and asked him how his sight was and he said to John, "I can see your face!" However, he could not see enough detail to count my fingers.

We prayed again, and then he could correctly count four different numbers of fingers held up. We prayed again and tested his sight in various ways: His eyes followed my finger left to right and right to left. We pointed out red and blue to him and he was able to point correctly to patches of red and blue on other material and then to black and white as well. He was able to count fingers at a distance of about 8 yards. It was very wonderful; God was very gracious. Knowing that Jesus prayed more than once and kept questioning is helpful for us nowadays when we are praying for healing.

It is clear in chapter 8 that Mark has laid out this passage so the physical healing is a picture of disciples' dawning realisation of who Jesus is: they have seen and taken part in the miracles but don't understand – Jesus said they were blind. The healing of the Blind man involved repeated asking with an intermediate stage of very blurred sight followed by a breakthrough to clear sight.

So we come to the next verses which are today's reading.

Who is Jesus

Again Jesus was asking repeatedly who do people say that I am? They give various answers. He then repeatedly asks, "Who do you say that I am." Peter sees clearly and announces, "You are the Christ!" This is inbreaking spiritual sight. He has got it by revelation from above.

Again, Jesus urges the disciples not to tell people. For the first time he told them plainly what his mission was: to "suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."¹

Peter can't endure such talk, such a negative prospect and actually rebuked Jesus. Jesus, of course, responded with a counter-rebuke saying his ideas are not of God but of man.

It turns out that Peter still has clouded sight. He sees the Messiah but very imperfectly.

So Jesus calls the crowd of people to him and teaches them further. It will be a slow lesson to learn this one and in fact the disciples don't get it until the resurrection.

Jesus challenges them that it is not just that he as the Messiah will suffer and die but (Mark 8:34) "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Take up your cross

Your cross is not sickness – the cross is taken up voluntarily – sickness is not! The cross was an instrument of death. The theologian, C. F. D. Moule pointed out, "People carrying crosses were people going to execution." Saying, "Take your cross", was a shocking – a frightening statement.

Jesus was not talking about burden bearing – carrying a heavy weight for him; nor is it a death wish. It is giving one's whole life over to following Jesus. It is telling self – the flesh – that it will not decide things. It is choosing to serve, it is choosing to give, it is choosing to obey, it is choosing other people's good – all in the service and obedience of Jesus.

¹ Mark 8:31

The surprise is that this is the way of freedom. Donald English wrote in the Bible Speaks Today commentary, "If you try to save and protect your life you lose it. If you clutch your life wholly for yourself, protecting it against all others, asserting your rights, needs and privileges, you lose it because it is not real life any longer. If you acknowledge life is not yours by right that all is privilege, and it is to be lived in the love that Christ reveals, then you possess life fully."

The Collect for Peace from the BCP, put it well when it said of God, "whose service is perfect freedom." It seems like a paradox for service to be freedom, but the world, the flesh and the devil are hard taskmasters who do not give the deep rewards they offer, and reduce us to being less than fully alive, less than fully human. We will obey some ruler in the things of conscience and the soul – will it be Christ or that trio: the world the flesh and the devil? Both require obedience; both promise good. We have to decide which is the true good.

The flesh life in us, that selfish part of us, does not like this message. Yet we have to decide, will we follow and obey Jesus, serving him and so at his command serving others, or will we indulge ourselves. The Apostle Paul speaks in this vein in his Letter to the Galatians,

Galatians 5:13-16 You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

The Collect for Peace

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us, thy humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²

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² B.C.P. p17