

Mark 6:30-56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 6 verses 30 to 56. And he began to teach them many things.

And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages, and buy themselves something to eat.

And he answered them, You give them something to eat. And they said to him, Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat? And he said to them, How many loaves do you have? Go and see.

And when they had found out, they said, Five and two fish. Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups by hundreds and by fifties.

And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing, and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all, and they all ate and were satisfied.

[1 : 27] And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.

And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 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. He meant to pass by them. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified.

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

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him, and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds, to wherever they heard he was.

[2 : 41] 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.

In the second half of Mark chapter 6, the apostles returned from their mission with news of their success. With Jesus, they go to a deserted location to rest for a while.

Like Jesus, they need time to refresh themselves and regain their strength. And once again, Jesus and his disciples are treating the wilderness as if it were a base of operations. This might be reminiscent of the story of David when pursued by King Saul, or of the story of Elijah the prophet. The wilderness is the natural place to reform Israel. It's reminiscent of God's original formation of his people in the wilderness after he led them up out of Egypt. John the Baptist was the voice of one crying in the wilderness in chapter 1, and the frequency with which Jesus spends time in the wilderness recalls his message and location.

The sea crossings might also draw the mind of the hearer of this text back to Exodus and the Red Sea crossing. However, even though they tried to get away for some solitude, they are immediately recognised and the crowd follows after them.

[3 : 54] Jesus takes compassion upon the crowd, as they are like sheep without a shepherd. That expression, sheep without a shepherd, is one that is also used to describe Israel after a defeat in 1 Kings chapter 22 verse 17.

It's also used to describe the state of Israel under the wicked and neglectful leaders in Ezekiel chapter 34, and to describe the appointment of Joshua in Numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 21. Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them, and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd. So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eliezer the priest, and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight.

You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey, and he shall stand before Eliezer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

[5 : 00] At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation. And Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 to 15 provides an even more startling background.

For thus says the Lord God, Behold I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. Hearing all of these verses in the background gives Jesus' statement added texture.

[6 : 06] Jesus is recognising that Israel have been ravaged by their enemies, neglected and preyed upon by their leaders, and that they need a faithful, divinely appointed leader over them. Jesus is like his namesake, Joshua, the one who will play the part of the shepherd for the neglected sheep, and will bring them into the promised pasture.

However, he is also God himself come to shepherd the abandoned flock. We might also hear hints of the story of the Exodus in the background here. Moses was the shepherd who led the flock of Israel through the wilderness with his shepherd's rod.

Jesus also crosses the sea, leads the flock, and provides them with bread in the wilderness. Jesus challenges the disciples to give the crowd something to eat.

However, the scale of that task is suggested by their response. 200 denarii would be about half a year's wages. Jesus instructs them to tally up what food they do have to hand, five loaves and two fish.

The five loaves might recall the five loaves of 1 Samuel chapter 21, which David received when he was fleeing from Saul, from the priests at Nob. Jesus then tells them to sit down in groups on the green grass.

[7 : 16] Why mention the green grass? Well, maybe because they're sheep. Jesus is the shepherd, and he's providing good pasture land for a formerly shepherdless flock. They sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

That's an interesting detail. As is the fact that only the men are numbered. This suggests that they are like a military company. Military companies could be divided into hundreds and fifties and that sort of group.

In Exodus chapter 13 verse 18, Israel left Egypt, and in Joshua chapter 1 verses 14, Israel entered Canaan in fifties. They were also numbered apart from women and children in places like Exodus chapter 12 verse 37.

Here they are being given bread in the wilderness, as Israel was fed by the manna in Exodus chapter 16. In Exodus chapter 18, Israel is also divided into thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens under appointed leaders.

And Jesus, by telling his disciples to do all of these things, seems to be highlighting their role as his ministers, acting on his behalf towards the flock of which he is the chief shepherd.

[8 : 23] He blesses and breaks the loaves and divides the fish, and the disciples distribute them. But it seems as if the miracle is taking place in their hands, not in his hands.

We shouldn't miss the Eucharistic themes here. Jesus treats the bread in much the same way as in the Last Supper. He takes it, he gives thanks or blesses it, he breaks it, and he gives it.

If we compare this account with Mark chapter 14 verses 17 to 23, and the description of the Last Supper there, further parallels can be seen, including the fact that it is in the evening, the eaters are reclining, and that all partake.

All of this seems to offer a picture of the order of the church. You have Christ as the chief shepherd, you have the under shepherds of the apostles, and they minister to people who are divided into different groups.

John the Baptist is Elijah, and in the previous account he's been described in a way that recalls the story of Elijah, in his conflict with Ahab and Jezebel. Jesus is the successor, he's like Elisha.

[9 : 27] And Elisha performs a multiplication of loaves in 2 Kings chapter 4 verses 42 to 44. A man came from Baal Shalisha, bringing the man of God, bread of the first fruits, 20 loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

And Elisha said, Give to the men, that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men, that they may eat.

For thus says the Lord, They shall eat and have some left. So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. Jesus then performs a similar miracle.

The parallels really aren't difficult to hear, but on a much greater scale. Not just feeding one hundred people, feeding five thousand people. Performing an Elisha-like miracle at this point may also cast the succession of Jesus from the Elijah-like John in sharper relief.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is told in each of the four Gospels, and each Gospel includes the detail of the twelve baskets of fragments gathered up afterwards. It's obviously very important.

[10 : 34] Why twelve? Perhaps it's an association with the fullness of Israel. Perhaps it's to make the point that each of the twelve has a basket apiece. In keeping with the ecclesiological themes, they are each equal partakers in the ministry of Christ.

We should also remember that the story comes after they have returned from their mission. Mission to the last is followed by ministry to the flock. Immediately after this, Jesus dismisses the crowd and makes his disciples go before him to the other side in the boat, while he goes up on the mountain alone to pray.

Perhaps we might think of Moses ascending Mount Sinai here, but if so, I think it would only be a faint illusion. The boat, however, is caught in a storm, as at the end of Mark chapter 4.

Jesus comes to them around the time of the dawn, walking on the sea. And there's a peculiar detail mentioned at the end of verse 48. He meant to pass them by. They, seeing him, are terrified, thinking that he is a ghost, at which point Jesus assures them, gets in the boat with them, and the wind ceases.

Once again, I think that there are anticipations of his later resurrection here, not least in the uncertainty about whether they are seeing a ghost, although I think there's more going on here.

[11 : 48] A number of scholars have connected the walking on the water with the Exodus and the Red Sea crossing, and have pointed to verses such as Isaiah chapter 43, verse 16, or chapter 51, verses 9 to 10, and Psalm 77, verse 19.

However, Richard Hayes suggests another background. In Job chapter 9, verse 8, in the Septuagint translation, God is described as the one who walks upon the sea as upon dry ground. If this is the primary connection, it may also help us to understand the reference to Jesus' intention to pass them by, because just a few verses later, in Job chapter 9, verse 11, we read, Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not.

He moves on, but I do not perceive him. In Job 9, God's walking upon the sea is associated with the mystery of God's ways, and the way that he passes by without our truly perceiving him.

Mark may be telling his account in a way that helps the hearer of his passage recall these verses from Job. The reference to passing by might also bring to mind Exodus chapter 33, verses 17 to 23, and Exodus chapter 34, verse 6, where God reveals his glory to Moses, passing before him, while shielding him from the sight.

[13 : 04] Passing by is repeatedly referred to in this passage, connecting the notion with the revelation of God's glory. When Jesus speaks to his disciples then, he tells them, Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.

It is I could also be translated, I am, a reference to the name of God, and that expression, do not be afraid, is commonly found when God appears to his people.

The event of walking on the sea then is, for Mark, a sort of divine epiphany in which the identity of Jesus is being revealed. But, although the disciples are astounded, they have insensitive hearts and they don't truly understand.

We are told that this is related to their failure to understand the loaves. What is that connection? Perhaps the connection is that their fear arises from an inability to appreciate the manner of Jesus' presence with and empowering of them.

He has equipped them to cast out demons. He has enabled them to multiply the loaves and his spirit and his presence is also with them in the boat facing the wind.

[14 : 11] A question to consider. Reading the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and of Jesus walking on the water, how can we better understand ourselves as the church in light of them?