

Mark 8:11-38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 8 verses 11 to 38. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.

And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, Watch out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.

And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?

Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear, and do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

They said to him, Twelve. And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And they said to him, Seven.

[1 : 1 2] And he said to them, Do you not yet understand? And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village.

And when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, Do you see anything? And he looked up and said, I see people, but they look like trees walking. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

And he sent him to his home, saying, Do not even enter the village. And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am?

And they told him, John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets. And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ.

And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

[2 : 2 4] And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Our passage in Mark chapter 8 is dominated by themes of perception and lack of perception. The Pharisees begin by asking Jesus for a sign, but he refuses to give them one.

He has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. In Isaiah chapter 29 verses 13 to 14 we see something of this prophesied. And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

[3 : 48] Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

Jesus warns his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, which his disciples don't understand. The point of Jesus' teaching is that teaching is like leaven, which, when hidden in hearts, produces loaves.

Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians and others, and introducing the new leaven of his word and his spirit.

Leaven is like a tradition. It's passed on from loaf to loaf, and the disciples need to make a clean break with the loaves of the religious and political leaders of Israel. That theme of leaven also reminds us of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the leaving of Egypt, leaving behind that principle of life in Egypt, in cutting off the leaven.

The disciples have to take the exact same approach to the teaching of the religious leaders of the nation. Yet the disciples start discussing the fact that they only have one loaf of bread. Is that what Jesus is talking about?

[5 : 02] Jesus rebukes them for their failure to perceive. They had only just been participants in two great miracles where bread was greatly multiplied. On both occasions they had gathered up an abundance of extra bread at the end, and yet here they are, worrying that they might not have enough bread.

They have eyes but aren't seeing, and ears but aren't hearing. They aren't truly recognising whom they are serving. While they should resist the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they should receive their bread from Jesus, who distributes it to them.

The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida that follows closely matches the healing of the deaf man in chapter 7 verses 31 to 37. And if we pay close attention to the details of this passage, it will lead us to ask certain questions.

Why does Jesus take him out of the village to heal him? Why does he say, don't return to the village at the end? Why does he put spittle upon his eyes? Why is there a two-stage healing? Why does the man see men like trees walking?

And a number of people have questioned the efficacy of Jesus' healing power. Jesus maybe just can't do this miracle enough, so he needs to have a second go at it. Maybe Jesus is using some traditional methods of healing.

[6 : 17] And maybe, according to some, Jesus is not actually performing a miracle. He's just manipulating his eyes in a particular way to give him sight. Now, if we think this passage is primarily about Jesus demonstrating his power, and that that's all that's going on, the question of the two-stage miracle will become a keen one.

It will be quite difficult to answer, because clearly the miracle does not seem to take the first time round. It only half works. Is Jesus lacking in miraculous power?

Or is there a problem with the man, for instance? Maybe he has a lack of faith that is an obstacle, or something along those lines. I think what helps us here is recognising that the miracles are frequently also signs.

In the Old Testament, human beings are compared to trees. You have empires compared to great trees spreading out their branches for the birds of the air to live in. Psalm 1 says that the righteous man is like a tree, growing by streams of waters.

Elsewhere in Scripture, you have that sort of imagery taken up, and the people of God are like a great forest. Perhaps what we're seeing in the two-stage healing is something that's related to the broader context in a parabolic manner.

[7 : 27] The disciples are people who have just been blamed for failure to see. They see, but they do not perceive. There is a two-stage healing that needs to take place in them.

Their eyes have been opened to some degree, and they see something about who Christ is, but they don't see him clearly yet. They don't truly perceive his mission and what's going on with him.

They don't see the kingdom mission. What they probably see is like a group of trees walking around, a new group of men and women who will be like the forest of God, but they don't truly appreciate what's happening.

Maybe Mark is drawing upon the imagery of Isaiah, where you have the images of trees growing up and being cut down, all this forestry imagery. Jesus is the root that grows up out of dry ground.

He's the branch growing out of Jesse. So maybe that imagery is playing in the background. The man is taken out of the village. He's told, as it were, to follow Christ outside of the village, and then Christ gives him his sight.

[8 : 29] But he does not yet have true perception. His eyes are opened, but he does not yet truly perceive. He sees some things, but he sees men walking around as if trees. So at this initial stage, he's perceiving to a degree, but there's a second stage of healing that must occur.

In the section that immediately follows this, there's another case of people failing to perceive in a two-stage sort of testing. Jesus goes with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and he asks his disciples, who do people say that I am?

They give him different answers, and he presses them for a further revelation. And Jesus is told by Peter that he thinks that he is the Christ. Yet even then, Peter does not clearly perceive.

As we see from what he says afterwards, he tries to resist Christ going to his death in Jerusalem. Peter is another blind man who needs a two-stage healing. I think then there might also be a clue as to why it's trees and why they're walking.

This is the beginning of the walking segment, or the way segment of Mark's Gospel. They're on the way to Jerusalem, and this comes at the very outset of the turn in the narrative towards Jerusalem.

[9 : 37] This two-stage healing of a blind man introduces the section, and at the very end of the section, at Jericho, just before he arrives at Jerusalem, he sees Bartimaeus and heals him by the roadside, another blind man.

So that movement towards Jerusalem is framed by the healing of two blind people. And as you read through the Gospel more generally, we can see that the image of blindness is used to reflect spiritual blindness.

So the healing of the blind man is not just a demonstration of God's power over the elements, the physical body. It's a picture of the spiritual state of the disciples and others, and what needs to still take place in them.

Those verses from Isaiah that Jesus alludes to are quite key within Mark, and elsewhere in Luke and the other Gospels. He talks about seeing you shall see and not perceive.

It's the judgment upon Israel. And even Jesus' disciples suffer from it to some extent. All these things he's doing in front of them, and yet they still cannot truly perceive who he is and what he's doing.

[10 : 40] Now, why are they trees walking around? Maybe a clue is to be found in what Jesus says to his disciples and the crowd after he has rebuked Peter. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Now the cross is such a familiar symbol to us that it's lost much of its weight. We probably don't think about it enough in terms of its associations and its particularity, because it represents everything for us.

It stands for all these things that are associated with Christianity. And the weight of associations has led us to forget the particularity of its associations. Sometimes even its association as an instrument of torture and imperial power.

One of the things that we can forget is its association with wood. It's a tree. And here, this might be part of what's going on. These are men expected to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

So Jesus is walking around, as it were, with this big log on his back, walking around like a tree, and followed by other people who are walking with symbolic trees on their back, ready to be crucified.

[11 : 47] And the disciples' vision, and yet failure to perceive, is associated with a broader failure to perceive that the cross is not just representing the crucifixion, but what Christ will achieve there.

The cross is not just a tree. It's also the victory of Christ. As they leave the village, as they leave their background and follow Christ, their eyes are initially opened, and they see themselves as men carrying trees towards Jerusalem, ready to be crucified.

But then there comes a later stage, with the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. As Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes, so he will give his Holy Spirit to them, and their eyes will be opened to perceive in a new way.

And they will see, it's not just men walking around as trees. It's not just a wooden cross as an instrument of torture. It's a means of victory. And it's Christ leading his disciples to Jerusalem, to suffering and death, but finally towards victory.

After the incident with the healing of the blind man, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. The masses seem to identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.

[12 : 55] Jesus' ministry very naturally follows from that of John the Baptist, and has many resemblances to him and Elijah. Like Elijah and John, Jesus spends much of his time in the wilderness.

The way he teaches, the way he acts, the miracles he performs, are like the actions of the prophets. Peter, however, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the awaited Messiah.

The disciples are strictly charged to tell no one. Once again, the time will come to do so. But it is not yet. And at this point, there's a transition in the narrative.

Jesus begins to teach his disciples about his coming death, teaching them in considerable detail. He will not only be raised, but he will be raised on the third day. There doesn't seem to be a mention about the manner of his death, though.

Although you'll see later on, he talks about taking up the cross. Peter then, showing his lack of perception, rebukes Christ. He's playing the role of Satan.

[13:55] He's not actually possessed. And Jesus' response to him, in many ways, it could be seen as, get back in line. In 2 Samuel chapter 19, verses 21 to 22, we have a similar statement.

And we see another way in which this is expressed in the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Christ rebukes Peter for taking the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant.

Those verses read, Peter is the preeminent apostle, and he still doesn't get it.

Suffering is absolutely essential to Christ's identity and his vocation as the Messiah. To follow Christ requires denying yourself. It requires the crucifixion of the ego, the I that insists upon its own, the I that insists upon what's due to it, the I that insists upon its possessions, its privilege, its status, all these things.

Those must be sacrificed. We must be crucified with Christ so that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. And the act of taking up our cross is marking ourselves out for death and by death.

[15 : 23] We are also bearing a mark that associates us with outsiders from the community, from the political order. We're being expelled from it. We're being treated as rebels and revolutionaries.

And this cross is not just something that we submit to passively. It's something that we take up in a committed act, and we walk with it. We walk with it behind Christ.

We're following one who has taken up his own cross. And his example is the one that we must follow. The one who would save his life will lose it. The one who wants to gain the whole world, but loses his soul, loses that thing that is most precious.

In taking up our cross, we are disgorging ourselves from the order that holds us in thrall with possessions, with status, with honour, with all these things that so occupy our thoughts and desires.

And we are becoming the living dead, those who no longer have the stake that we once had within this existing order, those who have given up everything in order that we might gain what is most precious.

[16 : 29] A question to consider. What are some of the things that you notice as you reflect upon the principles of honour and shame that are explored in verse 38?

[REDACTED]