

Mark. Chapters 1-6 Prophet Jim Smith

Of the four Gospels, Mark is the shortest. Until the early part of the twentieth century, it was regarded as the most insignificant, but during the last 100 years it has become the most important. The reason for this change is because we have come to appreciate, by a number of theological processes, that it is the earliest Gospel, written around 60-70 AD and that makes it the closest to Jesus time. So we have learnt to appreciate it's very special place in the history of God's people.

Traditionally, we have assumed that Mark got much of his material from Peter. This is based on a remark by one of the early theologians, Papias, who is quoted by another early writer Eusebius, as saying "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord, but not however in order." Twentieth century theology has suggested other ideas, but traditionally, we still hold with Mark.

It really doesn't matter a great deal. What we really want to know is this:- "What is this book telling us?" Let's take a look.

As with the book on Revelation, I can't print every verse, because that would make this too long a book. I have to ask readers to have their Bibles open as they read. Don't be afraid because I have included some Greek words. (The original Gospel was written in Greek.) Let them teach you and help you in your understanding.

CHAPTER 1.

1. The beginning.

Mark wastes no time, but gets straight down to business – "the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ." "Gospel" is our translation of "euaggelion" (ευαγγελιον) which means "good news." Mark is going to tell us good news about Jesus Christ. "Christ" ("Christos." Χριστος) means "anointed one", and is a translation of "Messiah" from the Old testament. This one verse packs a very big pinch, and leaves us in no doubt about what we are going to read – good news about the Messiah. This is Mark's style throughout the Gospel. Using a minimum of words and explanations, he says to his readers "Here is the uncomplicated truth. Take it or leave it!" But be warned - he is a very skilled writer. He may lay out the stories in a simple way, but he can also open the doors to very deep truths and challenges.

2/8 The forerunner.

The Old Testament ended with this word – "see I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5) Here is John, claiming to be the fulfilment of Mal 4:5. Dressed in prophetic clothes, he challenged people to repent, (as the prophets before him did) and offered water baptism as a sign of new beginnings. Being only a messenger of "one who is to come," he announced that there will be one after him, who will baptise in the Holy Spirit. No wonder John's ministry caused such disturbance among the people.

9/11 Jesus

In his first appearance, Jesus comes to John for baptism. His was not a baptism of repentance, because he lived a sinless life. (2 Corinthians 5:21) His was a baptism of identification. He was standing in our place, as he would one day do at Calvary. After his baptism, two signs were given for our encouragement:-

1. The Spirit descended onto him, like a dove. This is not to suggest that Jesus was without the Holy Spirit, but was meant to single him out in our eyes, so that we would know who he is, and that he has the right to bring good news.
2. The voice of God speaks, identifying Jesus for our benefit, and teaching us a very powerful truth – that Jesus is God’s “beloved.” This is the word “agape” (αγαπε) which is the Greek word for a very deep and committed love between two people. Jesus is in an agape relationship with God. Through his life and death, that same relationship will be open to us.

12/13. Into the desert.

This gospel moves fast! “Immediately” is a very popular word in Mark’s gospel, and immediately, Jesus is “sent out” into the desert, by the Holy Spirit, for time of testing. The Greek makes this clearer. Jesus is literally driven out (“ekballo” εκβαλλω) by the Holy Spirit. The time of testing, described at much greater length in Matthew and Luke,(Matthew 4: 1-11 and Luke 4: 1-13) is part of God’s plan to strengthen and equip Jesus for his ministry. In his time of testing he was attended by angels – not for the last time. (Luke 22:43)

15. The message

John goes to prison. No explanation is given, because Mark is keen to get on to verse 15:- “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” This is a very significant verse. It is one of the oldest Gospel messages in the New testament. What was it that Jesus taught:-

- a) The time has come.

This is an “end times” statement. The word for “time” is “kairos”. (καιρος) It means that a moment in history has arrived when significant things will happen. (See my book in this series on Revelation.) Jesus is saying “Throughout the Old Covenant, a Messiah was expected. His arrival would signal a change in the spiritual world. The end times would begin. Well, that time has come!” As an opening for a sermon, it would certainly grab people’s attention!

- b) The kingdom of God is near.

The “kingdom” (basileia βασιλεια) in the New testament is not a place, but means “the kingly rule of God.” Jesus is saying “God’s kingly rule, the time when he will intervene in history, and take his kingly position again in the physical realm is near – it’s now!”

- c) Repent.

I have explained repentance in the book “Jonah” in this series. It means to take a totally new direction. It means to be sorry for the past, to recognise the sin, to turn away, to turn to God and to walk in a new way of life.

d) Believe the good news.

This is a massive theological statement, and could (and has) fill the whole earth with books! We have to believe the good news, which means to believe in Jesus, AND to live the kind of life which he will demonstrate in words and deeds.

16/20 First disciples

The next thing we know, Jesus is walking by the sea of Galilee. As we have learnt, Mark has no time for nice linking passages! He sees two men, and calls them to follow. Then he sees two more and calls them to follow. This is what “believing the good news” means – commitment without hesitation or counting the cost. For Jesus, it is “now or never.” Why the hurry? Because the kingdom is near. The time has come, and there is no time to waste. There is such a compelling urgency to the Gospel of Jesus. Notice that he calls them to a purpose “to be fishers of men.” Everyone called into the kingdom has a job to do. We are called to be the crew of a battleship, not a hospital ship. We are called to fight, not to rest. We are called to struggle, not to comfort.

21/28. First battle

The ministry of Jesus is going to cause immense spiritual conflict. The human part of his creation were unaware of this, but the demons knew very quickly the danger they were in. Listen to the demonic confession of weakness – “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (v24) Jesus acts decisively, but the English doesn’t really carry the force of the original. A better translation would be “Jesus rebuked him, and said “Be muzzled, and come out of him.” The verbs used (epitimao, Phimoo and exerchomai) are all words of exorcism, and we will meet them again in Mark chapter 4, when we consider the stilling of the storm. The demon had no choice. In the presence of the stronger one, it surrendered.

The people were “amazed.” (thambeo θαμβεω) We will meet amazement many times in the Gospel, and generally it is not a good word. Amazement is not faith. It often leads to the rejection of faith.

32/39 Healing

After healing Peter’s mother in law of a fever, Jesus heals many people. In the first 10 chapters of Mark’s Gospel, nearly 50% of the text tells of healing. Jesus clearly wanted and longed to heal. We should remember this, especially when people are sceptical or cynical about healing. Jesus seemed to take this verse very seriously – “I am the Lord that heals you.” (Exodus 15:26) We should do the same.

After such a successful time, Jesus moves away “to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there as well.” Jesus has no time to stay in one place. He is not looking for status or hero worship. He has a job to do, and without looking back, he presses on. (Philippians 3:14) I am like him! I have a restless spirit. I have no time to stay in one place, or look back on the past. There is work to be done, and I want to press on and get it done.

40/45 A skin disease healed

A man came to Jesus with a very serious skin disease. (We used to translate this as “leprosy”, but we have now learnt that the Greek word covers a much wider category of skin infections.) With this disease, this man would have been banned from almost any human contact. When Jesus saw him he was filled with compassion. The Greek word here is “splanchnizomai” (σπλαγχνίζομαι) which means to be deeply moved – the very inside of the body is moved at the sight. It is thrilling to think that Jesus could have such an emotion. It gives me the courage to believe that he will understand me when I am in deep distress. He heals the man, and again Mark says “Immediately” - a word he loves - “the disease left him.” Of course it would – in the presence of Jesus the demons have already bowed down, and now a very difficult sickness bows down.

Sadly, the man, having received what he longed for, is disobedient. Jesus told him to keep his healing to himself, and go and offer sacrifices for his deliverance. But he didn't. Instead he went everywhere, spreading the news, and this meant that Jesus could not move around openly for a period. Why should Jesus have told the man to keep the healing to himself? We don't really know. There is a branch of theology called “The messianic secret.” This argues that Jesus wanted to work in secret. This would allow those who had “ears to hear” to penetrate his works, and see behind them the Messiah. We will meet this theology again in chapter 4. Or maybe Jesus felt the man needed time to reflect on what God had done, to allow faith and maturity to develop. Even today, we are sometimes too quick to parade our converts to the world, before they have had time to grow. Or perhaps it was just what Jesus felt was right. It certainly revealed the man's true character – he was disobedient. At the heart of faith has to be obedience.

Chapter 2

1/12 A paralysed man healed

Jesus was preaching in Capernaum, when four men brought their paralysed friend for healing. Being unable to get past the crowd, they went up onto the roof, pulled away the palm branches which made the roof, and lowered the man down. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man “Your sins are forgiven.” This caused confusion among his friends. They didn't want forgiveness, they wanted healing! It also troubled the religious people, and they asked themselves “who but God can forgive sins?” To prove his power to forgive sin, Jesus heals the man. We are meant to understand that if he could heal, then he could also forgive.

The real theological interest lays in these two expressions “Your sins are forgiven” and “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

In the first case (“your sins are forgiven”) the Greek is a past perfect. This means that Jesus said “Every sin you have ever committed, even from birth is forgiven.” In the second case (“authority on earth to forgive sins”) the Greek is present infinitive. In other words “I also forgive all and every sin you have done from today on forever!” This was a very powerful claim, and coming on top of casting out the demon, and healing the skin disease, it shows us the powerful person of Jesus. This is exactly what the writer is trying to help us understand. In the person of Jesus, a very powerful figure has stepped onto the world stage. And there is more to come.

13/17 Levi

Levi is converted. He is a tax collector, and his job was to collect taxes for the Roman government, which had occupied Israel many years before. Tax collectors were hated by the people, and distrusted by the Roman authorities. But Jesus takes no notice of these attitudes. Anyone who responds to him can become a disciple. As an evangelistic sermon, this verse doesn’t seem very much does it? “As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.” But evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the listener, and the Holy Spirit certainly got hold of Levi!

Jesus went to Levi’s home, and sat down with lots of people who the respectable would consider “outcasts and sinners.” Jesus never minded who he was with. This mighty powerful figure had time for people – any people. The religious people were concerned for the reputation of Jesus, but Jesus said “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Our job is to be where the sinners are, so that they can find Jesus. Then they can begin to put their lives in order.

18/27 Questions

Jesus wasn’t just an action man! He had good theological reasons for what he did and what he said. Here in this section, he answers a few questions, to make his position clear. John’s disciples want to know about fasting, and they get a strange reply – “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?” Jesus is not against fasting, but he wants it to be a joy not a bondage. let’s be released from our chains of bondage, and fast in joy, when it feels right to us. Let’s be clear – Jesus is not against regular practiced and discipline. But he is against it when it becomes a duty, not a joy.

He brings a freshness and a newness to all our understandings and behaviour. He is “new wine”, he is “new cloth.” “Come along” he said to John’s disciples. “Breakout of these old things. The new has come. It refreshes and uplifts. Enter into it now.”

The Pharisees notice that the disciples are picking ears of wheat, blowing away the husks, and eating the corn. But they are doing this on the Sabbath! They are harvesting, winnowing and grinding on the Sabbath! This is what all works based religions finish up doing to their followers – making fools of them. The disciples picked and rubbed ears of wheat in their hands, and the religious leaders claimed that this was harvesting, winnowing and grinding. Jesus breaks the chains again, when he says “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” How can he make such a statement? Because he is “Lord of the Sabbath.”

How does the religious establishment take to this “new wine?” We will soon see.

Chapter 3

1/6 Healing of a withered hand

Jesus was in the synagogue, when he sees a man with a withered hand. He makes the man stand up, and asks “Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” No one would answer him, The Bible says “He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said...” The word “anger” is from the Greek word “orge” (οργη) and it means a “righteous anger.” It is a very strong word. Jesus was powerfully stirred up by the hardness and stubbornness of people who would keep rigid laws, and let a man suffer, rather than having compassion. Works based religions, which is what the Pharisees were following, usually result in a loss of compassion. But Jesus wanted faith with compassion - that was part of the new wine. So he heals the man. But look at the response:- “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

So now the lines are drawn. In just 3 chapters, Mark has managed to show us the great authority and power of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the new wine of Jesus, and the absolute anger and fury of the religious leaders, who now begin to plan his death. Satan never changes. If we study Revelation chapters 12-19, we will see exactly the same pattern. Afraid of the power of God, Satan tries to strike, sensing his own destruction

7/19 More power

Large crowds followed Jesus, and he continued to exercise a powerful healing ministry. It is important to realise that power was a key part of the work of Jesus. The Christian faith does not just consist of head knowledge. As the Apostle Paul says, “because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” (1 Thess 1:5) During this period Jesus called his twelve closest companions. Judas is already described as “Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.” We will come back to Judas later.

20/30 Family matters

There are a number of interesting things in this passage.

a) v21 -the family of Jesus try to take charge of him, saying “He is out of his mind.”

There is a principle of Bible study – the harder the verse reads, the earlier it is. I know you might be saying “Prophet Jim, I don’t care about this kind of idea!” But if we want good theology, we must learn what principles have been used across the world in the study of documents. This verse is very hard. It shows the family of Jesus in a bad light. As the years went by, his family came to be held in high honour. James became a leader in the Church, and Mary was naturally highly respected. So this kind of verse would usually be made softer, or ignored. (It isn’t found in other Gospels.) Full credit to Mark, and to the early Christians, who let it stay where it is.

(We are building our base at Amasaman in Ghana. On this base I am building the “Excellent” theological centre. I want to train some African students in the deeper principles of Bible study and biblical research. There will be study of Greek, Hebrew, and all modern biblical scholarship. For too long we have believed that Africans cannot handle this kind of discipline. This is another of Satan’s lies. By God’s grace, I hope to challenge that lie.)

b) By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.

The Pharisees are determined to discredit Jesus, but this statement is foolish, as Jesus points out. If it were true, it would mean that Satan is fighting Satan, and his house would fall. Then comes this verse “all sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven.” Many Christians have worried about this verse, but it speaks of a very specific sin – ascribing to the Devil the works of God. That is what the Pharisees were doing. They were not denying Jesus’ power to drive out demons. They were saying that he was doing it by the power of Satan. This blasphemy is unforgivable. Very few Christians would ever commit such a sin. However, we can find it in the mouths of some of other faiths who attack us.

31/34 Jesus describes his true family - all those who do God’s will. This verse will be developed enormously by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, in his teaching on the body.

Chapter 4

We have seen the works of power, and there are more to come, but now we turn to Jesus the teacher.

1-9 The Sower

This must be one of the most famous stories in all of the Christian world! We learn that Jesus teaches in parables, and here he tells the story of a Sower who scatters seed on his field, and it falls into various types of ground – the path, the rocky places, the thorns and the good ground. Because the ground differs, so the results of the crop are different – some producing no corn, and some a hundred times the original planting.

10/11 Theology

“When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?”

Mark’s gospel has been described as light on theology, and heavy on action, but it is not true. This particular passage is an indication of the depth and complexity which we can find, when we look for it. Let’s look at it in detail:

1. The disciples asked him about the parables.

The Greek for parable is “parabole”. (παραβολη) The Jewish teachers used parables, to help make their teaching clear, but exactly what was a parable? They have been described as short stories, with one simple conclusion, which makes the point. But there was another form of teaching, known as “allegory.” In allegories, every detail of the story has a point. So, for example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when the Samaritan pours in oil and wine to the wounds, the Early Church suggested that oil and wine represented the bread and the wine of the Lord’s supper.

Both parable and allegory are valuable devices. Here there seems to be a bit of both in operation. The end line “he who has ears to hear, let him hear” fits awkwardly with the parable that has gone before it, so may be there is more to it than just a parable. That is certainly what we are about to read in verses 13-20.

I would say to readers - don’t worry about parable and allegory. The story has powerful teaching content, whatever type of story it may be. But do desire to understand that centuries of study have given us many insights, and we need to know them.

2. The messianic secret.

We have already met this theology once before, and we will see it again. Its base is Isaiah 6:- “He said, ‘Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9-10)

The idea is simple. The ministry of Isaiah was to be presented in such a way that only those who were willing to make the effort could see the truth. Those who just had a casual interest would never see the truth. Mark shows us Jesus working in the same sort of way. He doesn’t deliberately hide his teaching, but he presents himself in such a way that people either rise to the challenge to penetrate to truth, or they don’t. In many ways, the final statement of this theology is Calvary, where some saw no more than a criminal, and others saw the son of God.

14/33. The explanation.

A study of these verses shows a story which is close to an allegory. Every detail has a meaning. But don’t lose sight of the heart of the message – those who respond to Jesus are expected to be fruitful. Two parables – the growing seed and the mustard seed complete this teaching section. There were many more parables which are not written for us.

The section ends with this verse:- “He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.” (v34) We should take very careful note of this verse, for it is the beginning of a major theme from now on. Jesus explained everything to his disciples, yet they failed in ever

increasing ways to understand what he is saying to them. As Mark shows us the increasing power and majesty of Jesus, so he also shows us the increasing blindness and short sightedness of the disciples.

The disciples are seen as very fallible and frail. Why is this so important? In the Early Church, the disciples were regarded as very special men. They were the founding members of the faith. So to say bad things about them was unthinkable. So anything bad about them would be softened, or made easier to read and accept. But Mark makes no such attempt. He shows us the disciples with all their faults. This encourages us to believe that the Gospel is from the earliest days of Christianity, before the process of making the Apostles seem very holy and nice had begun. It is also an enormous encouragement to us, as we stumble around in our faith. If we struggle, and often seem to fall short of what God expects, we are not the first to act in this way. Even those closest to Jesus found it difficult.

35/41 The storm

First, let's look at Jesus. We already know that he has power. But how much? In this first power story, he shows that he has control of nature. "Peace, be still" are words used in casting out demons. In this storm, Jesus sees an attempt by the enemy to destroy him. But power belongs to God. And Jesus has no doubts. First he sleeps in complete trust, and then he rebukes the storm in complete faith. We must carry this picture on with us, as we move into the next two power stories.

But what a contrast in the disciples. Trusting in themselves, they are overwhelmed by the storm, and we see the true shallowness of their faith "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" As I mentioned earlier, this is the beginning of the revelation of their lack of faith. Despite all they had seen, they had not understood. It seems that it is not only the crowds who are failing to penetrate the messianic secret.

Chapter 5

1/20 A powerful demon

We have seen the power of Jesus over nature, but how strong is his power over the demonic world? Legion is a truly terrifying figure. Inhabited by many demonic forces, he raves among the tombs in great strength. yet in the presence of Jesus, the demons are reduced to pleading for their lives.

If that was the whole story, it would be no more than frightening. But the real miracle is the change in Legion, from a raving maniac to a man "clothed and in his right mind." And that's not all. In verse 20, he becomes an evangelist, going round the decapolis, telling "how much Jesus had done for him." For me, this is the true miracle of this story. It's not just dismissing the demons which is powerful. It's the redeeming of the man and the willingness to use him in God's service which is so beautiful. This is true power - to release and to restore, to restore and to equip, to equip and to send.

21/42 Sickness and death defeated

As Jesus was travelling around, two things happen at the same time. Jairus has a daughter at the point of death, and he comes to beg Jesus for help, and a woman with a serious bleeding tries to touch Jesus, believing that he could heal her.

Jesus heals the woman, but in the inevitable delay, the daughter of Jairus dies. Amazingly this makes little impact on Jesus, who tells Jairus “Don’t be afraid. Just believe.” Going to the place where the child lay, he says “Talitha Koum” which means “Little girl, I tell you get up!” Immediately (one of Mark’s favourite words) stood up and walked around.

We have to take these three stories – the storm, Legion and Jairus together. If we separate them, they don’t teach us what we need to learn. Mark has already shown Jesus as a man who could destroy demons, forgive sins and heal the sick. But in these three stories, he is challenging us to look at the whole of the ministry of Jesus.

He could calm storms with a word “He rebuked the wind and said to the waves “Quiet! Be still” He could destroy the strongest demon, and restore the one possessed to a place of wholeness and service. He could raise the dead - “Talitha Koum.” These three – nature, sickness and death had been the curse of creation since the beginning of time. All of the created order has had to live within the framework of these three experiences. But not Jesus. He has complete control of all of them, and sin (Mark 3) which leads to spiritual death.

This is the message which three stories are giving to us. Yes, Jesus can heal, he can forgive, he can work miracles. But he is so much more than these things. He is the totality of God’s control over his created order. In these stories, Jesus shows us how things were meant to be, and says “It can be that way again, if you trust me.” In Mark 1:15 Jesus preached “The kingdom of God is near.” Now we are beginning to see what this could really mean. From this apparently simple and straight forward Gospel, a very profound challenge is beginning to emerge. If we accept the claims of this man, then nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God. (Rom 8:39) But what if we do not? This is the challenge. This is the heart of the messianic secret. This is the heart of the Gospel. Mark’s Gospel is so powerful because it looks so innocent. But as we are seeing, buried within it is the deepest, most radical and challenging story of all time.

Chapter 6.

1/6. Nazareth

Jesus goes to his home town, and preaches, but strange things happen,

First, they were amazed at him. “Amaze” (Greek eklezzo) is not a good word. It’s amazement which comes from shock, from a panic reaction. Amazement seldom leads to faith in the Gospels. Second they announce “Isn’t this Mary’s son?” While we have to be cautious about social customs in Palestine at this time, this is not the most flattering of ways to address a powerful teacher. Last, they took offence at him. “Skandalizo” (the Greek word for “take offence”) is a bad word. From it we get words like scandal. They were scandalized by him. They were shocked that he would come to their nice little town and do these outrageous things! If only he would leave.

Even Jesus is amazed at their behaviour. He could only do a few miracles there, because of their unbelief. Only a short while before, Jesus was raising the dead. Now he is being rejected by his own people. Only those who have eyes to see can see. The rest see nothing.

This is the place where Jesus uses this verse:- “Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour.’” We should see that he doesn’t say this is the will of God. It doesn’t have to be this way. Sadly, it usually is this way.

7/12. First mission of the disciples

Jesus sends out his disciples on their first mission. They are sent, (Greek apostello, from which we get the word “apostle”) with authority (Greek exousia, “power”). Jesus had power, and he gave this power to his apostles, and through them to his people. We have no excuse for powerlessness. The powerful figure we are meeting in this Gospel is saying to us – “As it is for me, so it can be for you!” The disciples preached the same message as Jesus - “they preached that people should repent.” This was the same message as John the Baptist, and to him we now turn.

14/29. John’s death

This story is very well known, so I won’t repeat it. It is time for the messenger to fade from the scene, so that the one he spoke about can come into the full light. John suffers the fate of so many of the prophets before him. Jesus himself would say:- “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” (Matthew 23:37)

30/44. Five thousand are fed

This story is so full of detail – “green grass”, “groups of hundreds and fifties”, twelve baskets”, and “five thousand men.” Because of all this detail, we have always believed that this story came from someone who actually saw it. How exciting to get so close to Jesus! This story has many key thoughts to study. We see the power of Jesus, but this is not the first time we have seen him do amazing things. We see the growing blindness of the disciples, who had seen the same works of power, yet when faced with a large and hungry crowd, didn’t know what to do. We see God’s abundant provision for those who come into his presence, and we see the five loaves and two fish. This food is a very deep challenge to us. The disciples had to bring the little they had, add to it whatever faith they could raise, place all in the hands of Jesus, and trust him to do the rest. He did not fail them, as he has not failed the millions who have done the same ever since. A very challenging and a very encouraging miracle.

45/52 A storm on the lake

The disciples set out in the boat to cross the lake, and get into difficulties. In their struggle, Jesus comes to them. The Greek leads us to suspect that when the text says “he was about to pass them by,” we should probably understand that he was coming

close to them, not that he was deliberately trying to avoid them. Their response? After everything they had seen, they could only cry out in fear, because they thought he was a ghost. Not for the first time Jesus speaks calming words to humans:- “Don’t be afraid.” He gets into the boat, and a great calm settles on the sea - just as it did when Jonah was thrown into the sea. (Jonah 1:15)

Now comes the tough verse “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” What are we to make of this? Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, when he saw God at work. (Ex 8:15; 8:32) There has to be a response to the work of God. We either say “alleluia” or our hearts are hardened by doubt and scepticism. There is no middle ground. We all move one way or the other. Sadly the disciples were moving towards doubt and hardness. It is verses like this which help us believe in the genuineness of Mark’s Gospel. If someone was making up a Gospel, they certainly would not have wanted to show the disciples in a bad light, and so verses like this would never have found their way into the text. But the presence of hard verses like this one, give us confidence in the text. The Gospel writer included this, even though it showed the disciples in a bad light, because that was how it was. And let us all be warned. Hardness of heart can creep up on any one of us, if we begin to doubt the works of God.

53/56 Massive time of healing

The disciples may be struggling, but the people are not! As soon as they see Jesus, there is a mass move towards him for healing. “and all who touched him were healed.” But belief in Jesus as a miracle worker, good though it is, is inadequate. He is much more than a healer, as those “with ears to hear” and “eyes to see” were already beginning to understand. In the coming chapters, the healings are going to fade into the background, and the suffering servant of the Lord is going to step out, and complete his task.