

Sermon on Mark 8:22-38 - Healing, proclaiming, predicting and sacrifice

Introduction

Today's passage is in four sections. In the first, Jesus heals a blind man.

Next, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is and Peter's declares that he is the long-awaited Messiah.

In the third, Jesus reveals that he is to die and rise again and is challenged by Peter.

Lastly, Jesus tells his disciples that they must sacrifice worldly pleasures and security in order to preserve their souls.

Four sections. Four fascinating areas to explore. Miracles. The identity of Jesus. Prophecy. Sacrificial living. How long have we got?

The meaning of miracles

In the first section Jesus heals a blind man.

What you think about miracles? Have you ever seen one?

Earlier this week I read an article in the *Church Times* about Malcolm, a man who caught a virus at university and was eventually diagnosed with ME, a horribly debilitating illness.

That was 31 years ago.

Malcolm has prayed often but never been cured. Instead, he has found comfort in God's promise in Revelation 21 that ultimately every tear will be wept from our eyes, and that mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

He has been forced to accept that a miracle may not happen in his lifetime on Earth. But he retains his faith and waits in hope for that time, when 'pain will be no more.'

How, then, can we understand miracles? I'm going to focus on the rather enigmatic verse 26 - 'Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village"' - and hope that this provides some insights.

Jesus has just healed a blind man. He had broken the laws of nature. And not for the first time.

You might reasonably assume that this would be the ideal way for him to gain followers. Look - I have demonstrated the power of God! Tell everyone you can! *Let's get this movement going!*

But he didn't. Why?

It would seem that Jesus wanted the people to focus not on his miraculous power but on his core message - the need for repentance and faith. His miracles were merely a means to an end: to demonstrate his authority and his power.

Some of you will have heard or read stories of people who've inherited money or won the lottery, and are then besieged by long-lost friends and family members who want to share in the windfall.

They end up feeling like a walking cash machine, valued only for their money.

Jesus didn't want crowds of people seeing him in this way, a means to solve their material problems. Instead, he wanted to communicate to them that he was the Son of God and that they needed to transform their lives.

So, miracles were a means to an end – to demonstrate that God was working through Jesus.

Thus, in Acts 2 we read that shortly after Pentecost, Peter said to a crowd: 'Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him.'

And when Peter finishes preaching about Christ and the people ask 'What shall we do?', he replies 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Miracles are not commonly witnessed today. Perhaps the reason for this is that God is wanting us to focus on the message of salvation through Christ and encouraging us to bring forth his kingdom, a kingdom characterised by love, than to indulge in demonstrations of miraculous powers.

And it's significant to note that even when the crowds were shown miracles, many did not believe and follow Jesus.

The healing of the blind man took place in a village called Bethsaida and the gospels of Matthew and Luke both record Jesus as saying: 'Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago.' Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities in modern day Lebanon. Bethsaida had been blessed with Jesus' presence, preaching, and power, yet they had not repented. No wonder Jesus was angry.

Unbelief and the reality of Jesus

I wonder what stood out for you when you heard in the next part of the passage, when Jesus asks the disciples 'Who do people say I am?'

For me, it was recognising the name of the place where this event took place, Caesarea Philippi, which is at the northern-most point of present day Israel, in the Golan Heights.

The other week I was reading some interesting statistics about Christianity.

I enjoy statistics. They can, of course, be misinterpreted or misused. But they can provide vital insights on the human condition. Who we are, and what we believe.

And when a survey of over 4,000 people asked them how they would describe Jesus, only 60% believed that Jesus was a real person who actually lived.

The rest were divided evenly between those who thought he was a mythical or fictional character, and those who said they didn't know.

So were Christ to return to Earth today and ask us 'Who do the people today say I am?', we would have to admit that nearly a half of them either think that your story is a legend, or don't know who you are.

Maybe this applies to one or two people in this church today. That would be great. A church without doubters is one that is not fulfilling its purpose and reaching out.

So if you harbour doubts, I want to give you a special welcome, and invite you to consider some evidence about the reality and significance of what is recorded in the Bible.

There is clear evidence that Jesus was a real person.

Among academic scholars, there is little disagreement that Jesus actually lived. Lawrence Mykytiuk (MIKITIUK), author of a study in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, notes that, in ancient times, “Jewish rabbis who did not like Jesus or his followers accused him of being a magician and leading people astray ... but they never said he didn’t exist.”

Similarly, Bart Ehrman, author of *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* – an atheist - notes that the central claims about Jesus as a historical figure – that he was a Jew, with followers, executed on orders of Pontius Pilate, during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius - are borne out by written sources other than the gospels.

Ehrman points to in passages written by Jewish and Roman historians that corroborate the New Testament descriptions of his life and death.

For example, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus refers to Jesus in his books on the history of the Jewish people, written around 93 A.D., in the context of the execution of Jesus’s brother, James.

And a Roman senator and historian. Tacitus, writing a few years later about the burning of Rome in 64 A.D., refers to the founder of ‘the people known as Christians’ having been put to death by Pontius Pilate.

Similarly Caesarea Philippi is a real place that those who are very fortunate may visit today.

And knowing a bit about it helps to explain why Jesus posed the question - ‘Who do you say I am?’ - to his disciples.

Being close to the northern boundary of Israel, Caesarea Philippi had the reputation of being a place of religious compromise and susceptible to pagan influence.

Indeed, it was originally called Paneas, after the Greek god Pan. It was adjacent to a giant spring and related shrines dedicated to Pan. Today, that spring, though flowing only gently, still exists, as do remnants of the shrines. I know - I’ve seen them!

The settlement was later expanded by Philip, the son of Herod the Great, and renamed after Caesar, – hence Caesarea Philippi.

Philip’s father Herod had built a temple there in honour of the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, who was ruling at the time Jesus was born. And Josephus, the Jewish historian I mentioned earlier, describes this temple as having been ‘consecrated’ to the Emperor. What does this mean?

Building a temple to an emperor was a way of flattering him, portraying him as worthy of worship. Such a practice was intended to focus the loyalty of provincial people, those outside Rome, on the Emperor.

It began with Julius Caesar, who upon his death in 44 BC was officially recognised as a god by the Roman state. Within a few years his adopted son and successor, Caesar Augustus was allowing the cities outside of Rome to establish up temples to him, where he would be worshipped with sacrifice, like any other god, in what became known as the ‘imperial cult’.

So, when Jesus asks the question 'Who do you say I am?', the historical and cultural context is highly significant.

There were competing claims to divinity – in the form of pagan worship and emperor worship.

And, crucially, indicating a belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah would be a direct challenge to the Romans who had established a temple that was dedicated to the emperor, in which Caesar Augustus and his successor Tiberius, was worshipped.

Many Jews anticipated that the promised Messiah would free the Jewish people from the Romans and restore their rule over Palestine.

The question asked by Jesus of the disciples could equally be asked of us today.

How would you answer it? Who do you say that Jesus is?

Ultimately, we have to make a choice. We cannot be neutral. Did he exist? And if he did exist, was he – to quote C S Lewis – a lunatic, liar, or our Lord? Mad, bad, or God?

The survey I mentioned earlier found that 21% of the population would describe Jesus as God in human form, 17% as a 'normal human', 29% as a prophet and 22% as a mythical or fictional character.

And, surprisingly, it found that 17% believe in the literal resurrection of Christ. How would we describe Jesus?

Responding to Jesus, Peter replies - "You are the Messiah." Jesus wasn't a figment of man's imagination, like Pan or a reflection of human pride, like Caesar. But having answered correctly, Peter blows it!

When Jesus then begins to teach the disciples that he's going to suffer and be rejected, and that he'll be killed and rise again after three days, Peter begins to rebuke him, to criticise him.

That evidently wasn't the kind of Messiah that Peter was anticipating!

And so Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! ... You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Peter has correctly understood Jesus to be the promised Messiah but has failed to understand his mission on Earth.

Jesus's mission was not to bring material comfort to the Jewish people – to end their oppression by the Romans - but to offer salvation to the world: Jews, Gentiles, everyone. And that has become known as the 'way of the cross'.

Jesus says to his followers and the rest of the crowd: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

In other words, ultimately, material transformation in this life – whether through miracles of healing, or delivery from Roman rulers - is not as critical as spiritual transformation through repentance, baptism and a life following the teaching of Christ.

This is not to say that the material things do not matter. Of course, they do.

But we are told not to focus on gaining material wealth and the power that goes with it. Because, as Jesus said, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?"

Conclusion

So, in concluding, what have we learned through this passage?

First, we gain an insight into ***the true purpose of miracles*** when we read that Jesus tells the man not to go back to the village. Healing served a purpose to the individual who benefited, of course, but the main purpose of the miracle was to demonstrate that Jesus had the power of God.

Second, we are each confronted with the challenge of ***having to decide who we think Jesus is***, just as the disciples were invited to do. For some, this might first require a recognition that he was, indeed, a real person. For all of us, it is a call to understand Jesus better, and what following him implies for our daily lives.

Third, we learn how the disciples discovered that Jesus's mission on this Earth was not, as some had hoped, to deliver the Jewish people from the Romans. The disciples were thinking of human concerns and did not ***appreciate the purpose of God - the salvation of human beings through our repentance and faith in Christ***

And finally, we are taught that following Christ involves sacrifice, the way of the cross. ***That material gain is transient, but our souls last unto eternity.***

A closing prayer

God of compassion, the way of the cross may seem as much a mystery to us as it was to the immediate followers of Jesus. Help us to hear with ears inspired, help us to see with eyes opened to your ways, and help us to respond with lives committed to your service. Amen