

## **Getting to Know Jesus: An Eye-Opening Experience**

### **Mark 8**

#### *Introduction*

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, Sadi, quipped, "A wise man in the company of those who are ignorant has been compared by the sages to a beautiful girl in the company of blind men." When we look at Jesus we see that his greatness and glory was lived out amongst ignorant and blind people. More than this, as Jesus seeks to show his greatness and glory to people today he does so to an ignorant and blind humanity.

#### *The blindness of the people*

Sometimes people underestimate danger. There are people who drown because they underestimate the strength of the current in the water. There are people who die in car accidents because they underestimate the danger of driving with too much alcohol in their bloodstream. Famous RPA cancer surgeon Chris O'Brien died last week of a brain tumor. In an interview with Helen Dalley this is what he said:

I didn't really interpret my symptoms correctly. I was waking up with a headache. And if as a young doctor I had a patient come to me and say look I'm waking up in the morning with headache doc, what do you think it can be? My teaching was I should have said to the patient you need a brain scan, you might have a tumour. But I couldn't interpret that in my own self.

O'Brien underestimated his symptoms. But the most dangerous thing you can possibly do is to underestimate Jesus. Many people will go to hell because they have made the fatal mistake of underestimating Jesus and his importance.

In 8:27 Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" His disciples summarise popular opinions: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." All of these answers have one thing in common. They assume that Jesus is a holy man who, as such, because of his special influence with God, has been given God-given power to perform miracles.

Take the popular association of Jesus with John the Baptist. 6:19-20 tells us:

Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, *knowing that he was a righteous and holy man*, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

When Herod beheaded John because of a stupid promise made to Herodias' dancing daughter, he did so knowing that John was "*a righteous and holy man*." Herod and the people believed that any holy man, because of his close relationship with God, was likely to do extraordinary things. So Herod thought those people were probably right who thought the miraculous powers at work in Jesus and his disciples were proof that John the Baptist was now in the presence of God.

This view makes Jesus second to John the Baptist, now popular as a martyr. Such people did not see Jesus himself as the Great One who had immediate access to God's power. They gave all the credit to John the Baptist, not Jesus.

Others believed Jesus was "Elijah." The book of Malachi, some 450 years before Jesus was born, prophesies this: "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great*

*and awesome day of the LORD comes*" (Malachi 4:5). Jewish ideas about how God would fulfill this promise were confused. Remember, Elijah was one of the few people in history never to die. He was taken straight up to heaven. Many Jews believed the actual historical Elijah would return to earth. But, as Jesus explained, John the Baptist was the new Elijah, who like Elijah preached repentance.

Yet others said he was one of the prophets. All of these views involve classifying Jesus as some kind of holy man who, as such, might be expected to do extraordinary things, like the miracles he was performing and which were being performed in his name.

#### *The blindness of the disciples*

"We didn't underestimate them, they were just better than we thought." That's what England football manager Bobby Robson said after England lost in the World Cup. Jesus was far greater than his disciples thought.

This brings us to 8:27-30:

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?" <sup>28</sup>And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." <sup>29</sup>And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." <sup>30</sup> And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Read these verses in their context. All of chapter 8 concerns people's ignorance about who Jesus is. Particularly emphasized is the ignorance of Jesus' disciples. Don't misunderstand verse 29. When Jesus asks his disciples who they say he is, Peter responds, "You are the Christ", the Messiah, the Davidic King God promised he would one day send to rule over his people and, indeed, over all nations. At one level, as Matthew 16 indicates, this was indeed a moment of great insight on Peter's part. But Mark wants us to see how deplorably ignorant and slow to understand the disciples were and how even this great confession illustrates this ignorance.

Notice the close connection between this dialogue involving Jesus and his disciples and the healing of the blind man that immediately precedes this. Let's read verses 22-26:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. <sup>23</sup>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?" <sup>24</sup>And he looked up and said, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." <sup>25</sup>Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. <sup>26</sup>And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

The question you must answer here is this: Why did Jesus heal this blind man in such a progressive manner? The answer is this: Because the progressive seeing of the blind man is an action parable about the progressive seeing of Jesus' disciples.

Remember how Mark 8 begins with the feeding of the four thousand which is immediately followed by the Pharisees seeking a sign from heaven to test Jesus (v11). I mean, "Dah!" Jesus has just given them a sign from heaven when he fed this massive crowd with just seven loaves and a few small fish. This is a plain example of what Jonathan Swift once said: "There's none so blind as they that won't see." The Pharisees are blind but their blindness is due to their refusal to see.

But Jesus' disciples are also having problems with their spiritual eyesight. Immediately after the utter culpable blindness of the Pharisees has been exposed Jesus warns his disciples, "*Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod*" (v15). They think Jesus is having a dig at them because they forgot to bring bread with them. Jesus asks them, "*Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?*" In other words, "You guys are my disciples, yet is there any difference between you and the hard-hearted Pharisees who just challenged me? Do you have any more spiritual insight or understanding than them?" Then Jesus continues,

"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." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (vv18-21).

Even Jesus' disciples do not see him clearly. That's why we are next told about how Jesus healed the blind man in a progressive way. The lens of our eyes is normally transparent and, I am told, is made up of approximately 35% protein and 65% water. Our eyes become more cloudy from about the age of 40 onwards, as cataracts develop due to changes taking place in proteins, water content, enzymes and other chemicals. We become less and less able to see properly and may become totally blind. It may take invasive surgery to deal with such cataracts. When it comes to spiritual sight we also need the Great Physician, the Great Eye Surgeon to operate on us. So we read of Jesus' shocking technique. Jesus spat on the blind man's eyes.

He asked the blind man, "Do you see anything?" the man replies, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." It was then that Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again and at the point, when the blind man opened his eyes, his sight was completely restored and he saw everything clearly.

How do you see Jesus? Are you blind like the Pharisees because you refuse to see Jesus as he really is? If you are a disciple of Jesus do you see him clearly? Or is he to you like a walking tree? When he moves his arms and legs it just looks like branches of a tree are swaying in the breeze. How clearly do you see Jesus?

When Peter declares, "*You are the Christ*" the disciples' spiritual blindness has still not been completely healed; they still are looking at Jesus as if he was a walking tree.

When the blind man said he saw men, though they looked like walking trees, this was an advance on his previous state of utter darkness. When Peter, speaking for the disciples, acknowledged that Jesus is the Messianic King, Jesus "*strictly charged them to tell no one about him*" (v30). Why? Because he is not the kind of king the Israelites wanted, one who would drive out the Romans and restore the nation to greatness.

So Jesus immediately teaches his disciples what it means for him to be King:

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 (v31).

Notice how Jesus refers to himself not as "the Christ" but as "the Son of Man". Jesus is milking a lot of Old Testament background here, but one particularly important Old Testament reference is Daniel 7:13-14:

I saw in the night visions, and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

When Jesus calls himself the Son of Man, he is saying he will rule over all nations in an everlasting kingdom. But in Daniel's vision this great person just looks like an ordinary man, as frail and unimpressive as you and me. Indeed, so crucial is it that Jesus be fully human that it is necessary for him, in identifying with us in our humanity, to suffer and die. Just look at how Peter responds and what reaction he gets from Jesus:

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" (vv32-33).

Peter only sees Jesus as if he were but a walking tree, not clearly. After Jesus healed the blind man he warned him not to go into the village. Similarly, as Jesus works on improving the spiritual vision of his disciples he warns them not to tell anyone about him (8:30) and, as he comes down the mountain with the Three, he gives "*them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead*" (9:9). Any understanding of Jesus that does not begin with him as the Risen Christ will inevitably be distorted.

#### *Seeing Jesus clearly*

Neurologist Oliver Sacks tells about Virgil, a man blind from early childhood. When he was 50, Virgil underwent surgery and received the gift of sight. But his first experiences with sight were confusing. He could make out colours and movements, but found it difficult to arrange them into a coherent picture. He gradually learned to identify various objects, but his habits were still those of a blind man. In order to see properly Virgil needed a change of identity. As Oliver Sacks put it, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person."

It is one thing to observe what Jesus did or said. But to be able to arrange it all into a coherent picture, to be able to see Jesus in all his greatness with perfect clarity involves a radical change of identity - a dying to the old blind you. It is precisely such a change of identity Jesus demands of you and me: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (v34). It is only in the losing of our lives for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel that we will save it and only when this is essential to our personal identity that we will see Jesus clearly.

Jesus told Peter he was setting his mind not on the things of God, but on the things of man. That's why he was so blind to who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him.

Don't make the fatal mistake of underestimating Jesus. He was not just a great and holy man. He is your Lord and your God.

