

Missing the obvious

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, last summer I had the privilege of hearing Joshua Bell, the world famous violinist, playing live. And it was a fantastic concert. And it reminded me of an experiment conducted by the Washington Post newspaper a few years back.

When during the morning rush hour they got Joshua Bell to play at a metro station in Washington. And the experiment was to get him to stand incognito and play as a busker. And so he played a brilliant classical repertoire for 45 minutes using a Stradivarius violin worth \$3.5 million. And only days before, an audience in Boston had paid around \$100 a ticket to see him perform.

But on that morning, apparently, he collected \$32.17 from the passersby who stopped. So of the thousand plus commuters who rushed past him on that morning, the majority didn't recognise him or even stop to listen to the beautiful music.

And so they missed one of the world's most gifted musicians. But isn't that what many people do with Jesus Christ? We can be so busy rushing through life that we don't stop to give him the time of day.

[1 : 19] People can walk past Jesus Christ year after year, failing to recognise who he really is. Never stopping for long enough to listen to him. Or even considering the significance of his death and resurrection, which we celebrated last weekend.

And yet the sheer impact of Jesus Christ on human history means that we've got to check him out. We've got to stop for long enough so that we don't miss what we're meant to see.

And that's what our Bible text helps us to do in Mark chapter 8, verse 1 to 21. The Gospel of Mark is one of four eyewitness accounts of Jesus's life.

And in the first half, Mark wants his readers to see who Jesus is. He's giving us the evidence that we need to help us reach a verdict on him. And so the miracle of Jesus feeding the 4,000 reveals his identity.

And so the question, who is Jesus, is one that those at the time were being forced to answer. But it's also a question that we need to answer too.

[2 : 27] So how would you respond to the question, who is Jesus? Today I'd like us to see three things. First of all, the revelation of Jesus, verse 1 to 10.

Secondly, the response to Jesus, verse 11 to 21. And then thirdly, the relevance for us. So first, the revelation of Jesus. Second, the responses to Jesus.

And then third, the relevance for us. So first, the revelation of Jesus. Jesus feeds about 4,000 people. And if you've been tracking with us through Mark, then you're maybe thinking, hey, haven't we heard this before?

Because we have had Jesus feeding 5,000 people. So isn't just this the same story? Well, there are obvious similarities. But Mark, who is always succinct in what he says, wouldn't record the same thing twice.

So this is different because it's in a different location. So while the first miracle took place in Jewish territory, this one takes place in Gentile territory. That's where Jesus was located in the stories before this.

[3 : 33] Actually, there are subtleties in the language that pick up on this distinction. For example, in the original language, we see that the word for basket is different in the two different miracles.

Because apparently Gentiles use different baskets to Jews. So why does this matter? Well, it matters because Jesus didn't just come to bring salvation to the Jews.

He came to bring salvation to all. And so this feeding is saying that Jesus Christ is for all people. His mission is to the world. And so in what he says and in where he goes, he's revealing himself not just

as the Messiah for the Jews, but the Messiah, God's chosen king for all people. And so Jesus says in the passage, I have compassion for these people. They have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. The word for compassion here is a strong one. Literally, Jesus was moved in his guts, stirred deep down inside with pity for these people. The closest we'd come is when we see human suffering.

[4 : 42] Perhaps like children starving because of famine. Or even coronavirus patients who are fighting for their lives in intensive care. Our stomachs churn as we feel for them.

But what Jesus feels here is far stronger than human pity. It's actually divine compassion because the word is only ever used of Jesus.

And so Jesus is stirred deep down by this needy and hungry crowd. But they weren't just physically hungry. They were also spiritually hungry because they'd been with Jesus for three days.

And so they were looking for something more. Longing for a deeper satisfaction in life. I guess that's why so many more people tuned into church for Easter last weekend.

It's because there's a spiritual longing inside all of us. That even when we try to suppress it, just comes out because we're looking for help or we're wanting hope. And that longing is put there by God.

[5 : 43] And it can only ultimately be satisfied by Jesus Christ. Not by anything in this world. And so as we go back to the story, Jesus works this miracle with seven loaves and a few small fish.

And he satisfies the crowd. And by doing so, he's revealing his identity to his disciples. Jesus used them in the miracle just as he used them in the last miracle.

And so they could see by his words and by his actions that he's the Messiah, the Son of God. And yet they failed to pick up on this the last time. And so will they pick up on it this time?

It's like Jesus gives them another opportunity here. It's like he gives them an exam. But it's the exact same exam. And yet they fail the exam again.

Because they say to Jesus, where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them? It's like they're saying, Jesus, there's no Tesco.

[6 : 45] There's no Waitrose. There's no Sainsbury's around here. So where do you expect us to get food? Instead, they should have said, Jesus, remember how you fed a crowd like this before.

Why don't you just do it again? Well, Jesus did do it again. And he involved them again so that he could reveal his identity to them again. And so this miracle, like all the other miracles in the Gospel of Mark, shows us who Jesus is.

He's the Messiah. He's the Son of God. And that's what the disciples were meant to understand. And so are we. We're supposed to see by what Jesus does.

And we're supposed to hear by what Jesus says. That he is God's chosen king. The Messiah who came for us. He's being revealed to us.

So that's our first point. The revelation of Jesus. Second point is the responses to Jesus. And we get two responses in this text. We get disbelief and dullness.

[7 : 49] So let's look at each response because we still get these two responses today to Jesus. Disbelief and dullness. First of all, there's the disbelief of the Pharisees.

Their opposition to Jesus has been growing. And so we read, They're not asking because they're genuinely seeking.

They were well aware of the kind of things that Jesus was doing. Because in what Jesus said and in what he did, he was behaving like God.

So they already had plenty signs. But they were refusing to accept Jesus because of their unbelief. So they're not wanting to be convinced here. They'd already made up their minds on Jesus.

And so Jesus wasn't going to perform for them. That's why we read, He sighed deeply and said, Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.

[8 : 53] Jesus expresses his frustration at the Pharisees' refusal to believe. But the reference to generation probably echoes the wilderness generation after the exodus way back in the Old Testament.

Because that generation also stubbornly refused to believe. That was despite all the amazing signs that God had performed for them by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt.

So it's no wonder that Jesus sighs at the disbelief despite what's been revealed. Because Jesus' life and ministry was the sign.

That's why the Pharisees would get nothing more. And so the response of Jesus to them is quite startling. Because we read, Then he left them, Got back into the boat, And crossed to the other side.

They didn't believe, And they didn't want to believe, And so Jesus just left them in their unbelief. Now the same kind of unbelief continues today.

[9 : 57] Do you remember Darth Vader in Star Wars when he says, I find your lack of faith disturbing? Well we see that here. The lack of faith in God's revelation in Jesus is disturbing.

Because we don't need any more signs. And yet still many think seeing leads to believing. But it didn't work with the Pharisees and it doesn't work today.

And so we can't say, God if you'll just show me a sign, Then I'll believe in you. Or God if you just work this miracle for me, Then I'll become a Christian.

Or God if you answer my one prayer, I'll then devote my life to you. We can't expect more when God has already given us proof in Jesus Christ.

And so the problem for the Pharisees, And those like them today, Isn't the lack of a sign, It's the lack of belief. And so there's the disbelief of the Pharisees.

[10 : 57] That's the first response to Jesus. But the second response to Jesus is, The dullness of the disciples. Because they still don't understand who Jesus is. And so Jesus warns them of this danger.

So we read, The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, Except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. Be careful, Jesus warned them, Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.

What does Jesus mean? Well, Jesus picks up the conversation about bread, And follows on from the unbelief of the Pharisees. Jesus warns that unbelief, Like yeast in bread mixture, Will spread to his disciples if they're not careful.

The Pharisees and Herod were opposed to Jesus because of their unbelief. And so the disciples shouldn't let their dullness ferment to unbelief in their own hearts.

But they still don't get it. And so we read, They discussed this with one another and said, Is it because we have no bread?

[12 : 03] They're talking about who forgot the picnic basket, When Jesus has just warned them about the spiritual danger they're in. And so Jesus is patient with them. Listen to what comes next.

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them, Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, And ears but fail to hear?

And don't you remember, When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, How many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? Twelve, they replied. And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, How many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?

They answered seven. He said to them, Do you still not understand? Jesus challenges them by asking if their hearts are hardened.

He gets them to recall the two miraculous feeding miracles simply to review the evidence. And so they do. And they prove that there's nothing wrong with their maths.

[13 : 05] It's their theology that's the problem. Because they still don't understand who Jesus is despite two feeding miracles that clearly reveal his identity.

It's like they'd reached an all-time low in their understanding of Jesus. And yet we still meet this same dullness today when it comes to Jesus.

Because human nature is just the same. God has revealed enough to us so that we can see and hear and understand. And we don't need any more.

Yet still many fail to see what God has revealed. And so those are the two responses to Jesus. Disbelief and then dullness.

So we've had the revelation of Jesus. We've had the responses to Jesus. Thirdly, let's look at the relevance for us. Because the identity of Jesus is revealed to us as he feeds the four thousand.

[14 : 05] Yet those at the time were asking for a sign from heaven because they refused to believe. And even Jesus' disciples, those closest to him, struggled to understand his true identity.

And yet through it all, Mark is giving us the evidence to prove the claim that he makes at the beginning of his gospel. To say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

He says this in Mark chapter 1 verse 1. And so I'd like to wrap up by applying this to any who'd say they don't believe in Jesus and then to those who say they do.

So first, to any who don't believe in Jesus or maybe aren't even sure what to believe. Well, take a look at the rest of the evidence in the gospel of Mark for yourself.

Because no thoughtful person can walk past Jesus Christ without investigating him. You can't claim to have a balanced and thoughtful approach to life and still fail to check out the claims of Jesus Christ.

[15:07] The enormity of his claims and the impact of his life mean that you can't just ignore him. And so if you believe that Jesus isn't God in human flesh, then you need to have a reasonable argument at least to back up your position.

Which incidentally would also be a faith position. In other words, you need to know for sure and have the evidence to prove it. Because if there's a chance that God came into the world in the person of Jesus, not just to reveal himself to us, but to save us, and you're too busy to stop and take a look at it, isn't this a kind of intellectual suicide at best?

And it could ruin your life at worst. Just imagine you get a letter from Buckingham Palace and it says, Dear so-and-so. Then it goes on, Please get in touch with us because we believe that you're a long-lost heir to the royal family.

Unlikely, maybe. But what do you do if you get a letter making that kind of claim? Would you just throw it in your recycling? No. You'd want to check it out to see if there's a chance, even just a small chance, that it might be true.

Or another example. Just imagine you get a letter from your doctor and it says, Dear so-and-so, Please get in touch because we think that you have a life-threatening condition and we want to see you to check you out.

[16:33] What are you going to do? Surely you've got to check it out. Why? Well, because the enormity of the claims mean you've got to know for sure they're not true before you dismiss them.

Because if there's a chance these claims are true, then you stand to lose so much if you just dismiss them. And so can you see? Isn't it the same with Jesus Christ?

When you look at the things he did, miracles that feed thousands, and when you listen to the things he said, claiming to be God, come to save us, and when you consider the significance of his death and his resurrection and the promises that flow from that, then you put yourself in a dangerous position if you just dismiss Jesus without investigating him.

Because if he is who the Bible claims he is, then you've got so much to lose. But then you've also got everything to claim.

C.S. Lewis, the Christian writer, said, Christianity, if false, is of no importance. And if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.

[17:46] So don't continue in unbelief, asking for more evidence when all we need has already been revealed. So what about those who'd say, well, I do believe in Jesus?

Well, we need to hear of Jesus warning to us too, just as he warned his disciples. They had to watch the yeast of unbelief that influenced them.

And so do we. Because Jesus is teaching that we can be influenced by unbelief. Something can happen. It might seem small or it may be significant, but it can be like yeast that becomes all pervasive in our lives and it can end up hardening our hearts.

So during this time of COVID-19, it might be the loss of a job, the loss of income, the loss of an important plan, a wedding, travel plans, study, whatever.

It may even be the loss of a life. But whatever it is, it can impact our belief in Jesus Christ. It can cause us to forget that he is the Messiah, the Son of God.

[18:55] It can make us doubt his power and his love. It can even create a hardness of heart. And so if we follow Jesus today, then his warning is for us too, isn't it?

And so we must believe in Jesus no matter what. How? Well, the text shows us how Jesus answers our fears and how he counters our hardness of heart.

Because the Jesus who had compassion on the people in this text, this crowd, also has compassion for us. And his compassion for us led to extreme love for us as he died on a cross.

Because Jesus gave up his life by suffering and dying so that we might be saved. Saved from our sins that will separate us from God forever, but also saved for a future where death is defeated and everything that spoils this life will be no more.

And we can be certain that this is coming because Jesus rose from death. And so when we believe in him, the promise of everlasting life is for us too.

[20 : 11] And isn't that good news? It's good news that we need to hear and it's the good news our world needs to hear. Let me close with a prayer. Let's pray. Thank you, God, for sending Jesus Christ into this world for us.

We thank you for revealing him to us in a way that we can see and understand. And so we pray that our hearts would not be cold or hard or unbelieving, but that our hearts would respond in faith by believing in Jesus Christ, because he is the one that you have sent to save us.

And so we thank you for your goodness. We thank you for your clear communication. And so we pray that none of us who are tuning in would fail to miss what you are saying to us.

For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.