

“MORE HEALING (Mark 24)”

Mark 7:31-37

Conversation on a mobile ‘phone.

(Only one end of the conversation is heard, of course.)

Oh yes, hello. Is that *The Capernaum Cod, Carp and Kosher Shellfish Company*? It’s the *Greater Galilee Home and Commercial Insurance Friendly Society* here, Ian’s the name. I’d like to speak to Cephas, please. Yes, Cephas ... Peter ... Rocky, whatever. No, I don’t want Andrew ... no, nor those Zebedee brothers, I want the main man. Thank you.

Ah, Peter, my friend. How are you doing? Good, good. Listen, I need to have a word with you about the policy you have with us. No, nothing too terrible, but I’m a little anxious about the number of claims we’ve had from you recently.

Well, I know it’s all above board and so on, but – well, the boss is having a bit of a blitz. Do you mind if I just ask you a few questions? Good. There’s quite a sizeable claim for a roofing job – let me see: “New tiles and making good after hole appeared in lounge ceiling.” According to the explanation underneath it says that four men put a bloke in a bed down through it. Some kind of publicity stunt? ... He was a cripple? Fair enough, but why ...? He was healed. Good, good. Jesus!

OK, benefit of the doubt. You’ve also got a claim here for storm damage to one of your boats. The only thing is, according to what you’ve told us about the storm in the accompanying letter, there doesn’t seem to be too much damage in the end. The storm was stilled. Right – OK. Jesus!

There’s a curious one here from your animal husbandry subsidiary, too, the one over near Decapolis. Can I talk to you about that? Two thousand pigs drowned apparently. Don’t tell me – failed flying lessons! Sorry, just a joke. They just ran down the cliff into the sea ... after being possessed by demons? Jesus!

From the sublime to the ridiculous – you’ve also claimed for twelve wicker baskets that were lost after a picnic. What on earth were you doing there, then? Five loaves? Two small fish? What were the baskets for then? It fed all five thousand. Don’t tell me – Jesus?

So who is this man who’s been causing all the problems? They’re not problems – OK, OK. Well, who is he? From Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? He’s God, you say. He’s God. The man who has done all this is God. That’s a great relief – well, for me anyway. You see, if you look at your policy, Pete my old mate, you’ll discover we don’t pay out for acts of God!

Mark’s story continues to unfold. Jesus is moving on and as he does, Mark gives us clearer and clearer hints that this man really is God. Jesus, the man who came into view at the beginning of chapter one as a preacher offering a new outlook on life, offering a new agenda for those who were fed up with the old one – the agenda of self-reliance, of tradition, of legalistic, oppressive behaviour – that Jesus has started to show more and more of what the new agenda might look like. Mark is very cleverly building up the picture, disclosing more and more of what this is all about. Jesus has healed, he has exorcised, he has taught and preached, debated and discussed, engaged with the lost and the lonely, the pious and the pagan, the Jew and the Gentile. Gradually, as Mark has hinted at in the miracles of healing that he has chosen to highlight, Jesus has opened eyes and ears to the shape of the new kingdom. What is this new kingdom? Well, it’s the restored and renewed creation that God intends to establish under his sovereign rule and which he announced through the words of the Hebrew prophets. One day, they said, a Messiah would come, a man appointed and anointed by God, who would point the way to a new way of life, a new and better world order. And here in this story that we’ve read this morning we have the heaviest hints so

far that this is all bound up together – Jesus, the preacher-teacher-healer, the prophetic provoker, the radical rabble-rouser, the wise wordsmith: he’s the key to it all. He’s God!

This little episode begins with Jesus still in Gentile territory. Remember the last exchange he had with the woman from Phoenicia? It’s the Jews who will get the first bite at the cherry, naturally, because Jesus happened to be born Jewish, speaking Hebrew and Aramaic, keyed into the culture of that particular people. But the good news about the Kingdom of God is most definitely not something that is exclusive to the Jewish people – it’s for everyone, for all peoples, for all time. Anyway, it’s clearly important to Mark that he describes Jesus as still being among the Gentiles, in Decapolis, the “Ten Towns” (a bit like Stoke and the Five Towns of North Staffordshire – but more than twice as nice). How Jesus got there, we’re not entirely sure, because the route that Mark describes here is not a straightforward one (v31). Dennis Nineham says it’s a bit like going from Cornwall to London by way of Manchester!

Anyway, here he is and, once again, people seek him out. They may well have heard about Jesus and his miracles because of the way in which he healed the man in the graveyard, the Gerasene demoniac. And a little group of people turn up with a man who is deaf and has a bad speech impediment. Almost certainly this man has been deaf from birth and has never therefore been able to speak effectively. His friends or family decide that they want him sorted out and bring him to Jesus. In the description of this man’s problem is the first strong hint that there’s more going on here than just a healing.

As many of you know, I love words. I suppose that’s why I went off to do languages after school and why I am fascinated by linguistics. I notice odd words and wonder where they’ve come from. The word that is translated here as “*could hardly talk*” is a Greek word *μογιλαλον*. It’s what is called a “hapax legomenon” – which means a word that appears only once. This word does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. There are other words Mark could have chosen to use to describe this man’s problem (in fact, he uses a different one in v37), but he settled on this. It appears in the Old Testament, too – or in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*. Again, it appears only once – in *Isaiah 35:6*, which is a great passage about the Kingdom of God and what it will one day be like when God has brought about the healing and reconciliation and renewal that he intends through the activity of his Messiah. We’ll come back to that in a minute, so just keep that thought somewhere in your mind for the time being.

Back to the story for a moment. Jesus heals the man. He touches the affected parts. He spits on the man’s tongue (imagine that up at the Health Centre – “I’ve got a sore throat, doctor.” “Open wide, then, and I’ll just spit in your mouth. That should sort it out.”). He raises his eyes towards heaven and lets out a deep sigh – probably like going into a trance. All those things are found in contemporary books about healing – the magic actions and signs of the healer. Jesus is doing more or less what they would have expected of any healer who came along. Then what does he do? He commands the ears and mouth to be opened with this Aramaic word, which Mark leaves in its original here.

What effects the healing is the word being spoken. Another heavy hint that there is something special going on here. Throughout the Old Testament it is the word of God that accomplishes things. Again and again, God speaks and things happen. And, of course, the most memorable example of that is in the opening chapter of *Genesis*, where God speaks creation into being. As God spoke that perfect world into existence, so now the word of Jesus Christ speaks into being a sign of the new, restored creation, the Kingdom of God.

And the people are amazed. They are, in the Greek, *υπερπερισσως*. It’s another of those “hapax legomenon” words. The people are so “*overwhelmed with amazement*” that Mark has to make up a word to describe it – like “gobsmacked” or “discombobulated”. It’s a kind of epiphany for them, a revelation that this could be God. And into their mouths Mark puts the third heavy hint that this man Jesus is to be identified with God. Look at what they say in v37. There are very strong echoes of what we read in *Genesis 1:31*.

This is God, breaking into this flawed, spoiled world with the promise of a new start. The things that are wrong can be put right. There is a new agenda, a new approach to life, a hope for the future. It does not have to be this way. This here falls under what Walter Brueggemann might call “*the prophetic imagination*”. Jesus is saying – look, there is an alternative, and if you take seriously what I have to say, you can be part of it too. And Mark is drawing people’s attention, with his use of words and phrases, back into what his readers already might have known about God from the Old Testament. I mentioned the word *μογιλολον* which appears only here and in *Isaiah 35*. Let’s just take a moment to read that passage from the prophet Isaiah that Mark clearly sees as having some affinity with this story. [Read *Isaiah 35*]

The wasteland, the desert is going to be renewed. The people who first heard Isaiah, or who first read these words would have had some idea of what the desert was like – they lived pretty close to it, of course. But I think of it as being something more sinister than that kind of natural landscape. Think for a moment of the backdrop to films such as *Blade Runner* or *Judge Dredd*, landscapes that have become desert through the rape of the earth by humans, places devoid of any hope, of any beauty, seemingly of any chance of redemption. And into that bleak, desolate, God-forsaken environment comes the breath of the Holy Spirit, the kiss of God on the leprous face of the earth. The landscape comes alive with flowers and vegetation, the parched areas run with cool, pure water. Springs burst up through the land which has been exhausted by the exploitation of humanity. And the men and women whose lives have been blighted by disease and disability and demonic desolation find new strength, discover new ways of seeing and hearing, they can dance and sing and celebrate again, because God has restored their hope. They will be so full of joy it will seem as if they are wearing crowns of the stuff!

Now that’s the vision God holds out to his people. This world – which has for centuries been home to the forces of evil, where creation has been damaged and distorted, where men and women, the pinnacle of God’s good creation, have found their lives blighted by disease and unease, by despair and disillusionment – this world will be once again as God originally intended it to be and men and women will enjoy the relationship with God that would have been theirs had evil not left its hideous mark on their lives.

And here – here in Jesus – we see the beginnings of that new creation, that new kingdom. It’s no longer simply the words of the prophets, divinely inspired as they might have been. It’s the actions of the one who can actually do something about it. Ever since Jesus strode out across the Galilean landscape, confronting the forces of evil, proclaiming at the top of his voice the new agenda that God was offering to a depressed humanity, ripping apart the veil of despair and depravity so that the glorious light of God’s kingdom could shine through, the Kingdom has been taking shape. God was at work in Jesus. These were genuine acts of God which opened the windows into another world, into the right world, into the world that God had promised for so long.

And I believe that is still going on. We continue to see God at work through the Holy Spirit of Jesus, changing lives, bringing health and hope and healing to all – Jews and Gentiles. It’s not finished yet – not everyone is healed, men and women still lie and cheat and rape and kill, creation is not as it is intended to be – but we can see the signs, the glimpses, we can see transformed lives, we can see signs of hope. The clues are there for those whom want to pick them up. And you and I can be part of it all. All it needs is for us to call out to Jesus and ask to be included. That’s why he went to the cross. That’s why he was brought back to life. There’s no going back now. The Kingdom is on its way and we have seen what it can be like. As the American journalist Lincoln Steffens said after a trip to the Soviet Union in 1919: “*I have seen the future, and it works.*” Well, he was wrong – but we have had a glimpse of the future, the future of God’s kingdom, and we know it works, because God has guaranteed it.

Just think for a moment what the old way is like. Think of all the things that are wrong about this world, about this community, about your own life. There’s plenty that’s good, but there’s plenty that is not as it

should be. Then imagine it being transformed by Jesus. Imagine the kind of world painted by Isaiah in those words we've read. Imagine the transforming effect Jesus had on this deaf man. Imagine how he could transform your life. Now that should "*overwhelm you with amazement*" as it did the people in this story.

They were over the moon about it – and when Jesus told them to make sure they kept it to themselves, they couldn't help but go off and blab about it. The more he told them to shut up, the more they went on about it – like naughty children. But for them it was such an amazing insight into the Kingdom of God that they couldn't stop themselves sharing it. Jesus didn't need a press officer to put a spin on it, to "sex it up" in that appalling phrase we keep hearing about Alistair Campbell's Gulf War dossier. The people heard, saw, experienced Jesus at first hand and they were bowled over by it.

How does your enthusiasm for talking about Jesus compare with that? Some of you just love talking, I know – but what about? Does Jesus mean anything to you? Have you really experienced his work in your life? This is wonderful stuff. The vision of the Kingdom that Isaiah gives us is exciting enough. But to know that not only is it actually promised by God, but also in the process of being realised in our world, in our lives – well, if that doesn't make you want to talk about it, probably nothing will. Don't keep it a secret! Celebrate it and share it and make sure everyone else knows that acts of God are not be insured against, but to be enjoyed, now and for ever. Amen!

Questions for discussion

1. What evidence is there so far in Mark's gospel that Jesus is God?
2. There is evidence that Jesus followed some of the procedures used by other (pagan) healers of his time. Does that make any difference to your view of his healing miracles?
3. Why is Jesus so insistent that no-one should talk about him?
4. Read *Isaiah 35* again. Is it right to see this as a picture of the Kingdom of God?
5. That prophecy is obviously very clearly couched in the language and geography of Isaiah's time. How do you think of the Kingdom of God?
6. What signs of the Kingdom of God have you experienced or can see around you?
7. What new thing have you learned from this passage?