

**“ANOTHER PICNIC (Mark 25)”**  
***Mark 8:1-13***

When Mark's life of Jesus was first produced it was handwritten and the first few copies were passed around the little groups of Christians which met in the cities around the Mediterranean as a means of encouragement and teaching. It was limited edition publishing and I don't imagine Mark ever expected that his work would achieve the fame and prominence that it has since his death. But just consider what might have happened had Mark been writing today. This book – his “gospel” – could have been knocked out on a desk-top publishing programme and bound in a proper cover with some kind of eye-catching picture on the front, and then produced in large quantities for sale all over the place. He might even have persuaded a major publisher to produce it – the memoir of a person who had been very close indeed to one of the greatest figures in history. Indeed, judging by the apparently insatiable appetite of the contemporary book-buying public for anything that smacks of celebrity, copies of it would have been piled to the ceiling in Waterstones and W H Smith.

Imagine, then, that you'd shelled out £7.99 for this new book, which promised to give a unique insight into the life of Jesus the Christ and you'd taken it home to read. The first few chapters manage to grab your attention – there's the account of Jesus' arrival on the scene, proclaiming the fulfilment of the “*good tidings*” of the Hebrew prophets: the establishing of the Kingdom of God is on its way, a renewed and restored creation, just as God originally wanted it to be, and those who are prepared to give up their own agendas and trust Jesus for his radical new agenda of love, life and liberty can be included in it. Humanity can be restored, healing can be experienced and the old ways of the religious traditionalists, the rules and regulations which suck so much of the fun out of life, are swept away to be replaced by Jesus' new ethic of inclusion and commitment. And there are stories in this new book of ways in which Jesus has demonstrated the reality of his message by healing people, by doing amazing things to calm storms and feed people, by living out the truth of this new kingdom.

And you turn over the page to chapter eight and there's the story of Jesus feeding a great crowd of people with only a very small amount of food. “Hang on,” you think, “I've read this bit.” You flick back a few pages and, sure enough, there's the story. Maybe the pages have been bound wrong and the printer has managed to get the same bit in twice. No – the page numbers are different. Then you notice that some of the details are different, although it still appears to be essentially the same story. Mark's just a lazy writer, then, and his editor at the publishers hasn't done her job and he's just recycling ideas. You'd have thought he'd at least wait until the second volume was published before doing that. Fancy shelling out your hard earned cash on a book that doesn't simply copy from other books, but copies from itself!

But is this just the same story reworked for a gullible readership? Surely not. Quite apart from what we might believe about the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – and surely he wouldn't have got it wrong – there cannot be any reason why Mark should repeat the same episode only a few pages after the first mention of it. Now some people do believe that Mark has got a bit confused and this is indeed the same story, but I have no difficulty believing that there were actually two big picnics at which Jesus changed a small amount of fish and bread into a meal for thousands. The details of the two stories are quite different – different numbers, different location, different conversations, different timescales. And a little later on (in vv19,20) Jesus himself refers to two separate incidents.

So, when there must have been any number of very different things that Jesus said and did from which Mark could have selected his material, why does he choose to include two such similar stories? Well, one reason is that he is emphasising the point we referred to a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus had the conversation with the woman from Phoenicia (7:24-30). And for that the mention of location is important. The first picnic took place on the hills above Galilee, an area which was predominantly Jewish. The crowd would have been Jewish. The message that Jesus came to bring was going to be proclaimed first to the Jews. This episode takes place over near Decapolis, a Gentile area, so the crowd

would have been Gentiles. Although what Jesus had to offer was first heard by the Jews, it was not exclusive to them, so the Gentiles as well had the opportunity to respond to the same offer.

But another reason for putting this story here is once again to do with the way Mark arranges his material, I believe. You need to look at what Mark chooses to follow this story with. After this picnic, Jesus returns to the area of the Jews – around “*Dalmanutha*”, an area that has never been satisfactorily identified, but which is generally thought to be on the western shore of Galilee. And there, once again, he is confronted by the guardians of the Law, tradition and theological orthodoxy, the Pharisees. They’ve come to ask him some more questions (which Mark doesn’t record) and they demand a “*sign from heaven*”. They want to see some kind of supernatural confirmation of Jesus’ claims and teaching. Maybe they haven’t seen all the things that he’s already done, or maybe they don’t consider all that to have been unique enough to validate him, or maybe they’re just unwilling to believe anything at all: they’ll end up explaining away anything he does.

But, as I said, I believe that Mark has put these two episodes – the picnic and the demand for a sign – together in order to heighten the contrast between them and to say something to us about our attitude to Jesus and religion. The two crucial verses for this are *v4* and *v11*, so let’s have a brief look at the contrasts they throw up for us. It basically comes down to a contrast between open, amazed disciples who don’t always understand exactly what’s going on, and closed, cynical Pharisees who have got everything sewn up and cannot allow for anything to happen that is outside their little theological box.

Jesus has been out talking to these crowds and they have now been there for three days (*v2*). We’re not sure whether that means they’ve been out in the hills sitting listening for three days non-stop, or whether they’ve come out every morning for three days. The implication seems to be that they’ve been out for all that time and they’ve had nothing to eat. They have stuck with Jesus all that time, listening to what he has to say, seemingly content to enjoy and respond to his teaching. The Pharisees, however, just turn up and immediately expect Jesus to jump through their hoops. It’s a far more demanding approach.

When Jesus does decide that something needs to be done (*v2*), he is moved by compassion. He sees the need of these people and decides that the situation calls for a response. The Pharisees want Jesus to act not out of compassion, but out of compulsion. They demand a sign, a miracle. As far as they’re concerned, they are the ones in the driving seat and they see it as part of their duty to compel Jesus to act. And he is not prepared to do that. There’s another of his “*deep sighs*” and he tells them very forcibly that he will not comply. The phrase translated “*I tell you the truth ...*” means something along the lines of “*May I be struck down if I ...*”.

But the real contrast is between the disciples and the Pharisees in the two verses I’ve already mentioned, *vv4,11*. Here are the disciples, faced with a problem of no food for a large crowd. Jesus is concerned about them and doesn’t really want to send them away because some of them are too weak (one reason I think they’ve been there for the full three days). And the disciples, who not very long before have seen Jesus do a miracle to solve a problem exactly like this, stand around saying, “Well, I don’t know how we’re going to solve this. I’ve got no idea how to get out of this one.” There’s apparently no expectation that Jesus will do a miracle to get them out of this fix. It’s almost as if they’ve forgotten what happened before. And there’s certainly no demand for a miracle – “Come on, Lord, you’d better get us out of this fix!” They wait to see what Jesus will do. It’s his agenda they’ll follow.

Whereas the Pharisees come demanding a miracle. Jesus is going to fit in with their demands and their agenda. They know what it is that they expect and if Jesus doesn’t do it, then he can’t have their approval. It’s a kind of religion on demand. Now, we don’t know whether these are the same people who have been present when Jesus has done other miracles, or whether they are colleagues who might have heard of what Jesus has done, but they have certainly had ample opportunity already to see or hear what Jesus can do. And yet they still want something else. But Jesus is not interested in performing for them, giving them a short-cut to faith. Miracles are not a “*divine antidote to unbelief*”, as one commentator

puts it (and that to some extent is at odds with the “Signs and Wonders” movement). I wouldn’t be surprised if, even if he had given them a sign, the Pharisees had wanted something else. He just didn’t fit into their systematic approach to doctrine. They wanted it all sewn up and they wanted to know how to pigeon-hole everything. But Jesus wasn’t going to play ball with them on that one. And he still doesn’t. He will not perform for us on demand – especially if all we are wanting is a quick fix, a short-cut to faith.

You see, Jesus and the disciples are in it for the long haul. The agenda that Jesus offers is a way of life, a journey. The disciples stick with Jesus and believe in **him**, not just in what he can do. Yes, his way of life includes the miraculous, the unusual, the amazing – but there’s an awful lot of what we call discipleship that is consistent and plodding and demanding. The Pharisees, though, want quick results. They have drawn up their doctrine and they know what should be happening. If anything unusual happens, it has to happen when they say and within the parameters that they set. It may well amaze them, but it will amaze them when they’re good and ready for it. It’s a safe, secure religion which they are firmly in control of.

In the end, of course, the Pharisees will get their sign from heaven. The irony is that they will not recognise it. The legitimating sign for the ministry of Jesus is, as another commentator writes, “*the ambiguity of the humiliated and crucified Lord.*” And hard on the heels of that comes the resurrection, which the Pharisees try to hush up and which, ultimately, makes no difference to them at all.

So how do we respond to this? What’s Mark’s point in all this? Well, I think there’s a choice being offered here once again, a choice between the two agendas – Jesus’ agenda and the orthodox religious agenda. The choice is yours. On the one hand, there’s the way of the Pharisees. You have got your doctrine, your dogma, your core of belief. And it’s all very settled and secure. You know where you are. It’s been laid down over the centuries (by human thinkers, of course) and the fact that it has been held by so many people for so long is, as far as you’re concerned, a pretty good indication that it’s true. There is, of course, a place for the miraculous, but only to validate what you already know or to convince other people that what you believe is right. Any miracles will take place on your terms and will fit in with a carefully constructed rationale for miracles. If they don’t, then they’re either demonic or not really miracles in that they can be safely explained away by some kind of science. The system is closed and no-one, not even Jesus, can alter it.

Many, many Christians think like that. Probably most of us do. It’s neat and tidy and it stops us getting sucked in by heresy or anything that might draw us away from God. God is there to help us and to answer our prayers. We believe all the creeds and we’ve read a lot of stuff about what’s right and what’s wrong. It’s got the stamp of authority on it and the slightly mouldy patina of centuries of refinement. We know what’s right and we do our best to make God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit (if we believe he has a role to play) fit into it all.

But Jesus offers another way. It’s the way followed by the disciples. Yes, I know they were often pretty stupid and rather clueless: they didn’t understand a lot of the stuff Jesus was saying (and, let’s be honest, there’s an awful lot we don’t really understand even now). But they **believed** in him – not in stuff written about him, not in creeds and rules and regulations, but in Jesus. They believed that he offered them a new perspective on life, a new way of living that life, a new hope for their eternal future. And they followed him wherever he went. They didn’t make demands of Jesus – and on the odd occasion when they did (or when they got their mums to come and make demands, as James and John did), Jesus pretty soon let them know that that was inappropriate.

Miracles came along – with far more frequency for them than for the Pharisees – but they weren’t following Jesus for the miracles, for the spectacular, the unusual. The miracles just moved them off in new directions, towards new horizons of belief, new areas of life and service. They learned lessons from the miracles, they didn’t need them in order to believe. In fact, it seems Jesus would only do miracles when people already believed in him.

Now this is the important bit – and those of you who might think I’ve been drinking too deeply at the well of liberal thought will, I hope, see that I haven’t – what we believe about Jesus grows out of our knowledge and experience of him, rather than Jesus himself being moulded to fit what we think we already believe. Our doctrine, or whatever you want to call it, is dependent on Jesus and on his mighty acts. We do not need to check off what Jesus says, does, offers against our tick list of religious orthodoxy. I hope you’ve been able to see a bit of that in the way we’ve been reading this story that Mark has written. I have tried very hard to stick to what Mark has written here, to the story he tells. We could have compared it to the other gospels far more frequently than we have. We could have read it through the lens of specific parts of the rest of the New Testament (and we have probably done that unconsciously anyway because we cannot ignore what we know from there), we could have relied on what other people have written, but I have tried to bring out what Mark has written about Jesus and about his life and teaching.

We are **Christians**. We claim to follow Jesus the Christ. And yet, I believe, too many of us ignore what he says because it doesn’t quite fit in with the ideas that **we** have constructed about him, or that other people have told us are right. And we want him to respond on our terms, to do what we think is safe. Anything else we just cannot cope with. What it boils down to is this: when we face a problem or a situation that seems to be beyond us (like feeding four thousand people with a few loaves and a bit of fish, or a career plan that’s gone off course, or a relationship that needs sorting out, or an illness that invades our settled life), do we respond as the disciples did by saying, “Well, Lord, how are we going to cope with this?” and then following his instructions and enjoying the possibility of a miracle which moves us along a bit further on the journey towards being full participants in the life of his Kingdom, grappling with the new insights that it gives us into his ways? Or do we live our lives as the Pharisees did, convinced that we are actually doing what God wants us to do and every now and then demanding some kind of miracle just to reassure ourselves that it’s all OK, but actually we are closed to the new and exciting things that Jesus is calling us to, because we’re safe and secure as we are, thank you very much?

If you’re sat there in your comfy armchair of religious orthodoxy watching a television showing endless repeats of the same old pious dogma, Jesus will come bursting into your mental sitting room and say “Get a life!” And the life he wants you to get is his life, his life of adventure and newness and hope and heaven-here-and-now, a life of miracle and awe and wonder, a life of love and liberation, a life that will go on and on and on when this old body’s worn out. Don’t refuse his offer – and don’t make your acceptance conditional on Jesus’ fitting in with what you demand.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Do you think that this story is a different one from the one recorded in *Mark 6:30-44*. Why/why not?
2. Why do you think the disciples are unable to resolve the situation, even though they have seen Jesus do it before?
3. Is it legitimate for the Pharisees to ask for a sign from heaven? Why/why not?
4. Why is Jesus so frustrated by their demand, do you think?
5. What are the benefits of religious orthodoxy? What are the dangers of religious orthodoxy? How can we discern between the benefits and dangers?
6. Do you find following Jesus to be an adventure? Share from your own experience.
7. If we are open to the leading of Jesus, how can we be sure we are hearing him right?

8. What one new thing have you particularly learnt from this passage?