

**“A COOKERY LESSON (Mark 26)”**  
***Mark 8:14-21***

It has to be said, doesn't it, that Jesus is not the most straightforward teacher. Of course, most of us here this morning will have heard his sayings and stories and aphorisms interpreted on many occasions and may even have taken the trouble to read other books about what he said in order to try and make sense of his many pronouncements. But try to imagine reading Mark's story of Jesus' life for the first time without any prior knowledge of Jesus and his message – or, even more difficult, try to imagine being one of his disciples and standing with him as he spoke these odd words.

Once again this morning we come across one of Jesus' apparently random sayings – and once again his disciples, the little group of close friends with whom he travels around the area to the north of Palestine, cannot work out what he's on about. In frustration, Jesus actually says to them, “*Do you still not understand?*” The answer's “No” – they don't. And it's not very easy for us to understand what he's trying to say and why. It's the perennial problem for the preacher: how do you help your congregation make sense of a passage when you're not too sure yourself what it's all about? There are all kinds of explanations of what Jesus is trying to communicate here and all kinds of ways of making sense of this little episode. Some are very allegorical, seeing, for example, Jesus as the “*one loaf*” they had in the boat. Others are very critical, assuming that Mark has cobbled this story together from all sorts of other bits and pieces that he couldn't fit in anywhere else, and so great is his enthusiasm to include it here that he has rather mangled it all up.

However, it seems to me that Mark is always pretty straightforward in his writing and sets things down as he finds them. Yes, he arranges his material in certain ways to make a point – as we've seen in the past couple of chapters of this book – but there's no hint here of some secret code or weird cryptography on which some scholars stake their rather shaky reputations. We shouldn't, I don't think, look for too many hidden meanings in this passage and if we take what Mark writes at face value, it gets a bit easier to understand.

Jesus and his disciples are making their way by boat across the lake after the second big picnic – Jesus has just fed four thousand people with a few loaves and pieces of fish. As they are sailing across the lake they realise that they've forgotten to get any bread for themselves and there's only one loaf in the boat. Fair enough, they may well get a bit peckish before they reach the other side, but they're certainly not going to starve (as one commentator seems to think): after all, they've just had some bread and fish with all the others, presumably. Jesus, though, takes the discussion about having no bread as the cue for one of his random sayings – “*Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.*”

Now, these disciples are a fairly simple bunch, by and large. They've been talking about bread: Jesus starts mentioning yeast, so they take it literally. After all, why take it any other way? (It's a bit like the dwarves in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* stories. As miners, living and working in an environment where anything could collapse or explode at any moment, it's vital that there's no misunderstanding when it comes to communication, so they've never learned the beauty of metaphor or simile.) Maybe the Pharisees have a special rule about yeast – they seem to have had special rules about everything from getting animals out of ditches to how much parsley to tithe: it wouldn't be particularly surprising, then, if they should have some pronouncement about yeast. James Moffatt, in his translation of this passage writes, “*‘Leaven?’ they argued amongst themselves, ‘we have no bread at all.’*” And then Jesus starts berating them for being stupid, ignorant, hard-hearted, not understanding. It's all a bit confusing, isn't it? So what's it all about? What is Jesus trying to say?

Well, there's no doubt in anyone's mind, I don't think, that Jesus is talking figuratively here. He doesn't actually mean real yeast. Time and time again in the Bible – in both Old and New Testaments – yeast is used as a metaphor for corruption, for the insidious working of evil within a larger society or group. In fact, there's probably only one reference to yeast in the New Testament where it is taken to be something good at work, and that's in *Matthew 13:33*. But the disciples are taking it all literally because at this moment they are preoccupied with the issue of real bread – they don't have enough for their lunch.

And that is exactly the problem Jesus is talking about. The disciples are preoccupied with the material, with bread for themselves. And they do not need to be anxious about that. “*Don't worry about that,*” says Jesus. “*That's exactly what the Pharisees are doing. Look! I've proved in these two picnics – not once but twice – that I can meet your material needs, haven't I? You still don't get it, do you?*” And there is a clue as to what this “*yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod*” is all about. They have become preoccupied with the external, the material, the easily seen. Jesus is talking about the heart, about inner transformation, about attitudes.

We've come across these Pharisees a fair bit now as we've worked our way through these first few chapters of Mark's story of Jesus. And Jesus has clashed with them on almost every occasion, mainly because they cannot see that the Kingdom of God, the vision of a renewed and restored creation, is not something that can be manufactured or can be coaxed into being by just doing the right things in the right order. Jesus has just got on and demonstrated what it's going to be like as he has healed and exorcised, taught and encouraged. But, as we saw in the previous section, the Pharisees want extra signs, proofs that will fit in with their own, carefully prescribed ideas of what it's all about.

Let's just remind ourselves for a moment of what it seems to be that that Pharisees want – at least, as Mark portrays them. If you want to follow in your Bibles, please do. They are obsessed with image (2:16), religious practices (2:18; 7:1-4), rules and regulations (2:24; 7:1-4) and dogma (7:1-4). Their first priority seems to be to criticise those who don't conform; they are actually on the lookout for anything that doesn't quite fit in with their own way of doing things (3:2; 8:11) – it seems that they've made up their minds and then closed them down. However, that leads them to say illogical things (3:22) and lays them open to the charge of hypocrisy (7:9). In the end, they just want to eliminate anyone who proves awkward to them (3:6).

You see, this is all outward stuff, it's all about keeping the rules, adhering to the dogma, a visible piety which masks a set of attitudes quite at odds with the values of the Kingdom of God, values of love, compassion, grace. And the idea that such things as the Pharisees stress are what the Kingdom is all about is a pervasive one: it seeps into the consciousness of others and starts to affect all that they do – just like yeast in dough.

And, sadly, it continues to do so. We don't have Pharisees any more – at least, not in name. But the church of Jesus Christ is permeated by their yeast. There is so much emphasis on doing and saying the right things, so much stress on the right image, so much time spent on the peripherals, that the radical attractiveness of the message of the Kingdom is completely obliterated by all the things that do not matter. Whether it be the Christianity-by-numbers of the conservatives and charismatics or the stifling political correctness of the liberals, the easy formalism of the traditionalists or the we've-got-to-make-a-statement of the post-modern, post-evangelical, post-everything else bandwagon-jumpers, image is the thing: "Let's do this and everyone will see what great Christians we are."

Jesus says, "*Do you still not get it? Are you still in the dark over this? Are your hearts still hardened?*" This is not about the outward. Don't worry about that: it will all fall into place. This is about the heart. Hard hearts are those hearts which will not yield to God and to his message. It's a phrase which is used again and again in the Old Testament, in the words of the prophets who first pointed men and women towards the Kingdom of God, who predicted the renewal and restoration of God's sovereign rule in his creation, who first preached the "*glad tidings*" that Jesus came to proclaim and demonstrate. Again and again the prophets accused the people – people who made all the right sacrifices, said all the right words, recited all the right creeds – accused them of having the wrong attitudes, of living loveless and selfish lives.

You see, you and I can behave just as the Pharisees did – sing our songs with enthusiasm and read the right version of the Bible, mutter our amens to John Stott and Jeff Lucas, don our Sunday best and give

our proper gifts (or, if you're that way inclined, pepper our conversations with genderless pronouns, ask deep and searching questions about the authenticity of Second Isaiah, sign petitions in support of gay bishops, wring our hands over synod decisions) – but if our hearts are not right, if we are preoccupied with the outward signs, the material proofs, then we have lost the point of all that Jesus came to say and do. It's attitude that counts – attitude in the old sense of the word. You can do all you like in the way of trying to serve God so that others can see it all – attending all the meetings, going on the rotas, saying the right words, giving plenty of time and money – but if you're still slagging off others, still harbouring resentments, still wishing you didn't have to do it all, still preoccupied with the way other people see you, then your attitude is wrong.

William Barclay once wrote, “*Christianity does not mean reciting a creed; it means knowing a person.*” Of course, following Jesus necessarily means that you believe certain things about him – and about what he represents. Of course, following Jesus is not some kind of sentimental, easy alternative to living in the real world (as we shall see when we get a bit further on in the chapter – and we'll be spending a few weeks there in the autumn, so be warned!). But following Jesus is a heck of a lot harder than following a creed – and a good deal more risky.

The disciples in the boat with Jesus, used to a religion that put a great deal of emphasis on doing things – and being seen to be doing them – a religion heavily influenced (yeasted?) at that time by the Pharisees, couldn't yet grasp that Jesus was calling them into a **relationship** with him that would draw them into the life of the Kingdom of God. And he wanted them to realise that it was all a question of the heart, of being in tune with God himself rather than being in tune with what people said about God. Once that was right, the rest would fall into place.

And that's the challenge that has been before us since we first opened this dangerous gospel of Mark. How prepared are you to let go of those other agendas – the agenda of the world around, your own agenda, the agendas of the Pharisees – and trust Jesus for his? How ready are you to stake everything on Jesus being right? Do you want to keep trying to do the right thing by ticking the doctrinal boxes and singing “sound” songs, or do you want to walk in the risky, rocky footsteps of the one who said he is the only way back to friendship with God, the only sure hope for an eternal future in heaven? “*Do you still not understand?*”