

“SEEING IT CLEARLY (Mark 27)”

Mark 8:22-26

On this Sunday when we are making healing the focus of our worship, we reach a story in Mark's account of Jesus' life where he records another miracle of healing. We've come across several already in this story – each one is unique, with its own particular emphasis and its own special reason for Mark's inclusion of it in his gospel. There were, of course, many, many healings and exorcisms which Jesus performed, but Mark has selected only a few of them to record in any detail, presumably because they illustrate certain aspects of the life of the new kingdom which Jesus has come to proclaim.

As we've read through this gospel, this account of “*good tidings*”, we have seen that Mark is interested in the new agenda which Jesus has come to proclaim. Right from the opening chapter, where Jesus invites men and women to “*Repent and believe*”, or to “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine*”, we have seen Jesus speaking about and demonstrating the life of the Kingdom of God, the renewed and restored creation, operating as God originally intended. The Kingdom was first described in the visions of the Old Testament prophets and is now being brought to reality by Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the appointed and anointed Son of God. It is a Kingdom in which the diseases and disabilities of men and women are healed, where the lame walk, the deaf hear and the blind see. It is a Kingdom where love and relationship replace rules and regulations, where the followers of Jesus are committed to him rather than to bodies of doctrine, where the spiritual and the material mesh together in the hope and wholeness of God's *shalom*.

And in the words we've read this morning, Mark tells us the story of yet another instance of Jesus' healing. But it's another unique story and raises some interesting questions. Jesus and his little band of close friends – the twelve men he is preparing to continue his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God – have crossed over the Lake of Galilee once again and end up in the little lakeside town of Bethsaida. A blind man is led to Jesus and his friends ask Jesus to touch him, no doubt in the belief that this will heal him. Jesus takes the man away from the village, possibly to avoid any unnecessary fuss or confrontation, and goes through the little routine that he used with the deaf and dumb man back in chapter seven. The spitting and touching were at that time fairly standard ways of operating for the healers who plied their trade in the Middle East.

But it doesn't appear to be 100% successful at first. The man sees people “*like trees walking around*”. The Greek for that sentence is rather convoluted and no one can agree on an exact translation, but basically it means that this man can quite work out what he's seeing. He's felt people and he's felt trees, but now he can see, he's got them mixed up. So Jesus has to have another go before the man is completely healed. Why doesn't it work first time? Some people have said that it's because the man doesn't have enough faith, but there's no mention of faith here, and certainly Mark doesn't imply in any way that that's the case. Maybe Jesus doesn't quite have enough power to do it all at one go? He's tired and weary – as Mark has indicated on other occasions – and his batteries need recharging, so he can't quite complete the healing on the first attempt. Again, there's absolutely no evidence to suggest that, and no mention of anything that could possibly curtail Jesus' powers.

On Monday evening, we were having a meal with some neighbours, when, as part of a conversation that had taken its usual wandering route through all kinds of topics, we got talking about skiing and the ability of blind skiers to whiz around the slopes faster than many fully sighted people. My neighbour referred to an article in that morning's *Guardian* about someone called Mike May who had become completely blind at the age of three, before all his visual faculties had fully formed anyway. Now, at the age of forty six, he has had a pioneering operation involving a stem cell transplant and that has restored his sight in one eye. His case had been described in the journal *Nature Neuroscience*, because although he could now see, he couldn't interpret what he could see properly. His eyes and his brain are not yet quite in sync. The upshot is that he still finds it easier to ski with his eyes shut!

The next day, my friend turned up with the Tuesday's G2 section of the newspaper, which actually included extracts from Mike May's diary and they throw some light, I believe, on what is going on in this story. Let me read a couple of short passages to you.

March 20th 2000

I took my first flight since the operation on March 7th. It was very bumpy and I was keeping my mind off this by working. After about 30 minutes, I suddenly realised that I could look out of the window, so I did. I could see some white lines in the distance and brown and green patches sliding by on the ground. I was so excited and eager to find out what I was looking at that I asked the person sitting next to me: "Excuse me, I just got my sight back last week after being totally blind for 43 years. Could you help me figure out what I am seeing?" There was a long pause as she decided whether I was a lunatic or a miracle. I broke the silence by asking if the white lines I could see were mountains. She said: "No, honey, that's haze." From then on she and her husband gave me a play by play commentary on [what was below].

August 6th 2000

The theatre was too hot, so I adjourned to an Italian sidewalk café for a late dinner. It was a fabulous people watching spot, a streetlight was overhead and the sidewalk was on my good side, my right side. I can see colours, shapes and movements pretty well, but not details. People come in so many shapes and sizes and I think I saw one of each on that bustling London street corner.

January 12th 2003

Almost three years now with low vision and the mind's eye is playing a major role in my low vision experience. I wonder if a totally blind person has the opportunity to develop a mind's eye more than most sighted folks. [Professor John Hull, the blind theologian and writer has some interesting things to say about that, by the way.] Since they can see and *process* their environment quickly, sighted people wouldn't have as strong a need to picture the environment ahead of them. For example, I can picture several airports I frequent as I have had to compose mental images to efficiently get around these airports over the years rather than having to wait for assistance.

You know, I think that's what's going on here in this story that Mark records. The man had his sight restored – the physical healing – but then he needed his interpretative abilities restored, so that he could **process** the signals his eyes were receiving. He could see, his eyes were healed, but he needed his visual faculties, his neural system, healed as well in order to interpret what he was seeing. And for seem reason, Jesus operates in such a way as to distinguish between the two. None of the other healings of blind people in the gospels make this explicit, so there must be some point to it here, both for Jesus and, as we shall see, for Mark. What might be the point of Mark's including this story, then?

Well, **firstly**, it says something about Jesus' power in healing. As we've already said, the fact that each of these miracles is utterly unique both in the situation of the person needing healing and, more particularly, in the way Jesus deals with it, suggests that healing is not to be confined to any one method or ritual. There's no formula of words or actions that brings about healing – it's the power of God which is at work and that power is not to be defined or confined by us. Those of you who attend the healing services here will know that we usually follow the same pattern, but that's not because I believe it's the only way or the right way or whatever, but because it is a way we find helpful. Healing is not some kind of magic that happens if you says the right words in the right order – it involves faith and a readiness to experience God's activity in your life.

Secondly, this story teaches us something about patience. Admittedly, the blind man didn't have to wait long for complete healing, but there is a reminder here that healing is not always complete and

instantaneous. Sometimes it does take a while for a full recovery. Sometimes healing does come in stages, a little at a time. When God is at work, he works at his own pace and has his own reasons for moving more slowly than we'd like. The key is to keep praying and keep believing.

Thirdly, I believe this fits in with other things that we have seen as part of the healing process where Jesus is concerned. He is not concerned only with physical healing; he is concerned for the whole person. The psychopath in graveyard at Gerasa was not only healed, but clothed and reintroduced into society. The woman with the haemorrhage was not just healed but had her humanity, her place in the community restored. The little daughter of Jairus was healed and then Jesus told her parents to get on and give her some lunch. This man does not only have his physical sight restored, but is given the apparatus to ensure that his sight is useful to him, his mental processes are restored too. God isn't interested in simply healing people as part of a kind of spiritual sideshow, impressing people with the razzamatazz of great healing meetings, demonstrating his power just for the sake of it. Maybe that's why Jesus was often, as here, eager to keep the healings low-key, and didn't want people going around making a big fuss. The life of the Kingdom Jesus came to declare and demonstrate is life in which the whole person is valued and loved.

But, once more, I think there is a more important reason for Mark's inclusion of this story in his gospel – and for his inclusion at this particular point. He's put it in here between Jesus' warning about the "*yeast of the Pharisees*", the constant obsession with the outward, the material, the observed, and the passage we'll look at next time in which the disciples identify who Jesus actually is.

You see, Jesus has come declaring a Kingdom in which God's perfect will is done, a Kingdom in which the eyes of the blind are opened, as the Hebrew prophets so often proclaimed. And Jesus has come as the instigator, the inaugurator of that – he is the Messiah, the Christ, the chosen one of God. Many people just don't see that. The Pharisees and the guardians of tradition and of the Law, for a start, are unable to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. They have their own ideas of what the Messiah will be like, they have their own set of doctrines, their own carefully compiled lists of rules and regulations – and Jesus just does not fit into all that, so they blank him out. Their minds are closed and so, metaphorically speaking, are their eyes. Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus actually calls them "*blind guides*."

The disciples, on the other hand, are able to see that Jesus is special. They recognise that there is something holy and authentic about him. And there are many others who realise that he is a good teacher, a powerful healer, a clever philosopher. But they don't actually understand it all yet. Look in the previous few sentences, at 8:17,18,21. Jesus keeps banging on about understanding. They have their eyes, their sight, but they can't make sense of what they see. They don't know the significance of Jesus yet. It's in the next section that they begin to understand – and even so, it will not be until after the events of Easter that they fully comprehend what Jesus is all about.

The point Mark is making by putting this story here is that it's not enough just to **see** Jesus. Many, many people do that. He is for some a great teacher, for others he is a wonderful example of love and self-sacrifice, for yet others a political revolutionary, and for many the founder of a great world religion. But that's not all. It's not enough to look at Jesus and see him. There's far more to it than that. That information, those truths have to be processed. We have to make sense of it. **Why** is he a great teacher? What's the point of what he teaches? It's not just about being nice to other people. **Why** is he such a great example of love and self-sacrifice? If what he did on the cross is just an example to follow, it's a pretty futile gesture.

No. It's not just seeing Jesus. It's recognising and understanding what he's really all about. We'll look at that in some detail over the next few weeks as we take this story of Mark's further. But I want to leave you with the challenge this morning to look carefully at Jesus. To see not just a man – not just another man, another leader or thinker or whatever – but to recognise the Son of God, to acknowledge the significance of Jesus for your life. Jesus, in his teaching and in his healing, holds out the offer of a new

way of looking at life and a new hope for the eternal future. I'm inviting you to accept that offer and see more than a great man, but a great man who is the Son of God and can change your life and transform this world. Pray that the Holy Spirit will move your image of Jesus from your eyes to your brain and heart.

Questions for discussion

1. Share any experiences you may have had of being without sight – , partially or completely, permanently or temporarily.
2. Why do you think Jesus led the blind man out of the village before healing him?
3. What was your first reaction to the need for a second healing for this man?
4. Is it true that healing is not always instantaneous? Share any experiences you have had of healing.
5. What is the difference between seeing Jesus and understanding Jesus?
6. In what ways do people see Jesus without understanding him?
7. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage?