

Mark 6:30-56

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[0:01] It's no fun, is it, trying to understand something that you just can't get hold of. It's the experience, isn't it? Do you remember maths in school? You just couldn't grasp it, or I couldn't grasp it.

And you knew that you didn't understand it for your science. And that's the experience of those who are struggling to understand, but they know they are struggling to understand. But there are those of us out there who struggle to understand and we're not even aware of it.

You observe that too, don't you? There's sometimes somebody will crack a joke. And people will laugh along, but they don't know why they're laughing. Or somebody gives you an instruction and they just fail to take it on board.

And they're struggling to understand without really realising it. And it doesn't come with the same level of frustration, does it? If you don't know that you've not understood something, you're not frustrated.

But in lots of ways, it's a much worse situation to be in. Because at least when you know that you're not getting something, you can seek to find ways to find out. But when you're oblivious to your failure to understand, you just continue in your ignorance.

[1:11] You just don't know. And I'm never sure which camp Jesus' disciples are in. Do they know that they don't understand? Or are they just oblivious?

They are infamously slow to learn. But I think it's difficult to work out how self-aware the disciples are. Are they struggling to understand Jesus, who he is, and what he's come for?

And they know they're not getting it, so they're a bit frustrated, and maybe they're a bit impatient. But then on the other hand, at different times, it seems they struggle to see Jesus for who he is. And they're really oblivious to the fact that they don't get it.

One thing I do know is this. We shouldn't be that quick to judge. I have often heard sermons and read commentaries where people are very critical of Jesus' disciples for being slow on the uptake. And it's possible, I think, to read the Gospels in a way where you think that the disciples are like dumb and dumber. But who is not to say that you are not like them?

[2:17] Is it really possible to be struggling to understand without really realising it? And I think it is. And so maybe some of us should look in the mirror and see that we are as slow to learn as well.

And Mark's Gospel particularly picks out this strand of the disciples struggling to understand. And this passage is very, very helpful. Now I want to look at the four sections that we're going to see, and I've divided them up.

So verses 30 to 34, I want us to see the mission's fruit. The mission that the disciples have just been on, we don't read about that on your sheets. You can read about it earlier in chapter 6.

But our passage opens with a kind of feedback session. Look at verse 30. The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they'd done and taught. And he said to them, come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.

The many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat. Twelve generated a lot of interest in the kingdom of God. So people come very curious to find out more.

[3:19] They come from the villages around and the crowds want to see and they want to hear more. So much so that it was really hard for Jesus and the disciples even to get a dinner break. So they try and get away from the crowds.

Verse 32, they went in a boat and they go to a desolate place by themselves. But the appetite of the crowd is so insatiable that they predict where Jesus is going and they run ahead to the place where they went.

So verse 34. And when he went ashore, he saw a great crowd. And he had compassion on them.

Because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. Now I think that is an amazing verse. And there's three things in particular I think which are amazing about it.

First of all, Jesus who is exhausted and who is tired. He saw the crowd and he had compassion on them. If this story was about me, I can guarantee you there is one word that would not be in the middle of that verse.

[4 : 21] And it's the word compassion. When I'm exhausted and I'm desperate for a break from people. And then I discover that some very persistent people interrupt me. And they trap me down.

When I see them and I open the door to them. I am not compassionate. I am frustrated. Sometimes angry. Sometimes overwhelmed. Sometimes even despairing. But not Jesus. He is filled with compassion.

And in the same circumstances, my default is to worry about my own needs and my own circumstances. But Jesus' default is to look to the needs of others. The second amazing thing is, look at how Mark describes Jesus' attitude to the crowds.

He says, they are as sheep without a shepherd. And that's not only a really powerful metaphor. But actually, it's a blast from the past.

It's talking about something in their history. In the Old Testament, that phrase is used to describe what life was like for Israel when their leaders, spiritual and national leaders, failed them.

[5 : 21] And so it's hard to miss the fact, isn't it, that Jesus sees himself as the leader of the people of Israel. He's the leader the people of Israel have always needed. They're not only a curious crowd, they are a shepherdless crowd.

And Jesus has come to shepherd them. And the third amazing thing about verse 34 is what Jesus does with his compassion. You see that? With his compassion on them, they are like sheep without a shepherd.

And he began to teach them many things. He could see deep into their hearts. He could see them and then lead like no one else could. He felt for them deeply.

And because he felt for them deeply, he fed them with God's word. And he knows that what they needed more than anything else was God's truth. And having fed them with the word of God, Mark then tells us that he fed them with food as well.

And so we see secondly the feeding miracle in verses 35 to 44. And basically it's a really common problem. People are hungry, they're out of the desert. And Jesus has been teaching them.

[6 : 23] It's very late in the day and the disciples think the crowd should be dismissed. So they can head to a surrounding village. They can go to a restaurant or the supermarket. But Jesus had other ideas.

And to begin with, he suggests to the disciples that he could feed the crowd. And it makes absolutely no sense to them. So they explain to Jesus, listen, if you're going to feed this crowd, it'll take nearly half a year's wage to feed these people and we can't do it.

And I'm guessing that is exactly what Jesus wants them to realise. That they can't do it. They can't do it. But he can. It's a common problem that meets with an uncommon solution.

And Jesus asks, what food do you have? And they say, well there's a little kid here, he's got five loaves and two fish. Jesus divides the group onto the grass.

And then he takes the bread and the fish. He gives thanks to God and he asks the disciples to distribute the food. Now note the astonishing thing we're told at the end of verse 44.

[7 : 28] And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. He divides them up, doesn't he? He divides them up.

And they ate verse 42 and were satisfied. Now I've just given the game away. But actually the whole point of Mark's narrative is you don't know how many there are until verse 44.

We know that it's a big enough group for people to be broken into groups of fifties and hundreds. So it's much bigger than the average church picnic. It's much bigger than school outing.

And we need to remember that the amount of food that Jesus had really on a hungry day I could probably eat myself. And here he divides it up and everyone gets something.

Verse 42, they all ate and were satisfied. And then we find out there are leftovers. Verse 43. And I think Jesus is just showing off at that point.

[8 : 29] They took up twelve baskets of full broken pieces and a fish. And to cap it all, verse 44, you see these five thousand. And that's men, not including women and children.

It's a miracle of incredible proportions. He's taken a scrap of food and he's turned it into a meal for thousands.

And they all have enough. And there's some left over for lunch boxes the next day. It's amazing. But it's important that we're not so amazed by the miracle that you don't see what this means.

You need to see what this means. And again, it's a blast from the past. Because where did the miracle happen? It happened in a desolate place. It occurred in a desert region.

And here is an amazing provision from God. And it's an amazing provision of God of bread from heaven. And if you're familiar with the Israelites in the Exodus, you'll have noticed there's close parallels, aren't there, between the provision of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness.

[9 : 34] Manna was a kind of bread. You can read about it in Exodus 16. And just as God supplied all his people's needs in the desolate place back in Exodus, so now Jesus does.

And it's as if Jesus is doing something that God is famous for. And that perhaps tells you and I something about the identity of Jesus. And the next segment of the narrative, the hints about who Jesus is, start to come thicker and faster.

And this time it's the walking miracle. And Jesus walks on the lake. And that evening Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him by boat so he could have some time alone to pray.

And when he was on the land, Jesus can see his disciples rowing into the wind and straining at the oars. So he goes to them. And his intention, which is so strange, isn't it?

That his intention was to pass them by. Look at the end of verse 48. It is astonishing. It's a really strange detail for Mark to include. It doesn't need to be there.

[10 : 38] So why is it there? And I can't help wonder whether we're meant to hear that phrase again and again and we're meant to hear the echo. In the Old Testament scene from Exodus 33 and 34, in the narrative where God reveals himself to Moses and God's glory passes by Moses and Moses hides in the cleft of a rock.

And when they see him walking by on the lake, the disciples are terrified and they think they've seen a ghost. But Jesus responds by telling them, verse 50, Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.

And again, I think we see the echo. We hear countless times in the Old Testament when people caught a glimpse of God's glory and they had to be told, Do not be afraid.

And straight after that, Jesus says something of immense significance. Verse 50, Take heart, it is I.

And again, the echo comes. Literally, he's saying, Take heart, I am.

And you think back to Moses at the bush which didn't burn in Exodus 3 and God says, I am who I am. And the child of the Israelites, I am has sent you. And Jesus is taking on his lips some very significant words that God used to reveal himself to his people.

[11 : 59] And then we're told, aren't we, that when he climbed into the boat, the wind immediately died down and we're back to Mark 4 where the stilling of the storm of the word. And it's a reminder to you and I that Jesus can do what only God can do.

The wind may have died down, but the minds of the disciples are racing and they're anything but calm and no doubt they've got fear coursing through their veins. And verse 51, they are astounded. But again, note the surprise.

Mark also reminds us they were astounded and they are confused, verse 52, because they did not understand about the loaves. Isn't that astounding? They've just seen Jesus walk on the water.

They were utterly astounded for they did not understand about the loaves. And what Mark is saying to you there is if they'd understood about the loaves, they would not have been astounded that Jesus was walking on the water.

If they'd understood the feeding miracle about Jesus' identity, they wouldn't have thought the walking miracle was utterly remarkable. They didn't get it. And obviously their hearts were hardened.

[13 : 08] They weren't hardened like the people who rejected Jesus, but nevertheless there was still a stubbornness of their hearts that needed to be overcome. And no doubt their hearts were softening, but they were still a long way from seeing things clearly.

Then Mark records in the next section the multiple healing miracles in the days that followed, verses 53 to 56. And it's almost unavoidable for Jesus. Jesus' reputation is growing at a rapid rate.

He's now officially famous. Not famous in the sense that he's won a Winter Olympics medal. But famous in the sense that every second person stopping him in the street asking him for his autograph.

It's frenetic. They try to bring their sick relatives to him. Friends that get closer to Jesus. People who sold beds that you could carry a sick person on. Had never done so much business.

People were happy to touch the edge of his garment. Verse 54. When they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognised him and they ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever he was.

[14:11] And whenever he came, wherever he came in villages, cities, countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces. They implored that they might touch even the fringe of his garment and as many as were touched from the well. There's growing recognition, isn't there, of Jesus, but continued power.

Jesus' power to deliver people from sickness and health doesn't seem to be running out. Mark makes no comment on whether these people had any interest in Jesus apart from what he could do for them.

But nevertheless, his compassion meant that he continued to engage with these desperate people. And his divine strength began to continue to bring healing and release.

Now, what are they saying to us? Three things, as I conclude. I think Mark wants you and I to understand human need.

Need is everywhere in Mark's Gospel. You find hungry people, sick people, curious people, desperate people. And they all want something. But Jesus' verdict is really worth reflecting on. He thinks that the one thing that all these people had in common is that they were sheep without a shepherd.

[15:23] And what they really needed was a leader. And not just a leader who could point them in the direction of food or in the direction of healing or in the direction of explanation, they needed a leader who would actually feed them.

Who would actually share God's truth with them. Who would actually heal them. They needed the kind of leader that their creator had always intended them to have. They needed a shepherd.

They needed a shepherd. And they needed a good shepherd. And the observation of verse 34 still stands today. Doesn't it? And it has great relevance and significance for now because Jesus' diagnosis of the crowd is his diagnosis of your life and mine.

human need is everywhere in our world. People need feeding and teaching and healing. They need compassion and reassurance and friendship and hope and many, many other things.

And Jesus knows us better than ourselves. And his verdict is that what we really need is leadership. The leadership that can actually draw aside us and supply what we need and someone who can satisfy us completely.

[16:31] And we need the kind of leader that our creator always intended us to have. We need the good shepherd. And not only yesterday who we are here today but our family members our friends and our neighbors and our work colleagues.

We all need a shepherd Jesus is saying whether people know it or not. Whatever everyone needs is not just what Jesus can bring but actually Jesus himself.

And Mark wants us to understand that. He wants us secondly to understand the need of compassion. The nature of compassion. And I'm particularly thinking of verse 34. And it really is just a remarkable and mind-boggling verse because what I find most amazing is what Jesus does with his compassion because it's not what you expect.

He sees the crowd. He knows they're curious. He knows they want to see miracles. He knows that many of them are desperate to have their sickness healed, their demons cast out, their stomachs filled.

So what does he do? He teaches them. And Mark says he began to teach them many things. His first instinct is not to feed them, not to heal them, not to cast out demons.

[17:48] His first instinct is to make sure that they understand the kingdom of God. Now I don't want to overstate this because in the rest of the passage Jesus is very interested in feeding them and making their bodies whole.

But it is significant that Jesus' compassion leads him to teach. And again we see that all the way through Mark's Gospel that Jesus teaching the kingdom is an act of compassion.

And that ought to challenge the way that we think of him. I begin to notice that very often we draw a firm distinction between ministries of teaching and ministries of compassion.

And we tend to think that the ministry of compassion is meeting an obvious and immediate need but Jesus doesn't work with that distinction. Mark 6 verse 34 says that compassion is seeing their true need and seeking to meet it.

And that will mean feeding hungry people, it will mean healing the sick, but it will also be feeding with God's word. And showing them how they can be spiritually healed and fed.

[18 : 58] It is compassionate to teach people about the all-satisfying shepherd of Jesus. It's compassion to tell people about the wonderful forgiveness that Jesus offers.

It's compassion to tell people to help people understand who Jesus is and what he's here for. And that he eventually came to bleed his life away on the cross because he cared for people so much. Compassion is seeing shepherdless sheep and giving them what they really need. And what they most need is Jesus himself. And so yes we must clothe and feed the poor.

Yes we must be kind-hearted communities. But without teaching the gospel that is not compassion. and thirdly and most fundamentally what Mark wants us to understand is really Jesus himself.

Jesus is telling you in this section that Jesus can do the sort of things that only God can do. He's telling us that Jesus does the things that God himself is famous for doing.

[20 : 10] That he feeds thousands in a desert with bread when there is little bread. And he passes by and he reveals his glory. And he comes to people that see his glory and says you do not need to be afraid.

And Mark is multiplying the hints that Jesus and God have a lot in common. And he's showing us over and over again that when Jesus speaks he speaks with the authority of God and when Jesus acts he acts with the power of God.

Who might that suggest Jesus is? Jesus is very different isn't he to the other leaders that we meet in Mark's gospel. And he's very different to the leaders we meet today.

Jesus sees the crowd and he sees sheep without a shepherd and he overflows with compassion like a tap you can't turn off. He's the shepherd all people need. And he's the shepherd that does things that only God can do.

And he's the shepherd who does the sorts of things that God himself is famous for doing. He's the shepherd who speaks with the authority of God and he acts with the power of God and who might that suggest to you that Jesus is?

[21 : 20] And the disciples are struggling to understand all this. And if we'd be there we might have struggled too. And maybe today you still struggle and that's okay.

Because Jesus is in the business isn't he of patiently revealing himself to people as we see here. He wants people to understand. He helps you to understand if you ask him to.

But what I've discovered in this passage this morning is this. But as each of us grows in our understanding there is a sense in which Jesus ought to be less and less amazing to us.

It's really shocking. I know that sounds strange. But do you remember what Mark said about the disciples in verses 52? They were astounded and they were amazed because they hadn't understood about the loaves.

And the implication is that if they'd understood about the loaves they wouldn't be so astounded. They would still have known it was incredible but it wouldn't have surprised them. And so I think in my own life if I really believe the things that Mark is telling me and if I really believe that Jesus was the good shepherd and if I really believed he had the power that Mark shows as he has I might be less and less surprised by Jesus.

[22 : 37] I would be deeply interested in getting to know him more. If you're here this afternoon as somebody who's curious about the Christian faith but you're not sure can I encourage you don't let be don't let don't let being afraid to let your don't be afraid to let your curiosity grow further.

Get to know Jesus. Keep struggling to understand. It's the best struggle in the world. And if you're following Jesus if you really believe that Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for us then I think we need to be a little bit less surprised by Jesus.

I wonder if we really believed we might stress a little bit about things a little bit less and we might pray to him a little bit more and we might be a little bit more confident about the future and we might turn to his words and listen to what he says a little more readily.

And a little less distracted by the worries of this life and we would be focused on the things that matter. It's not as if the disciples hadn't seen the miracle of the 5000 they just hadn't put it together in their minds and hearts.

And I think we can be very easily like them. We've seen what Jesus can do but we've not understood and so we find ourselves struggling and surprised and we need to turn our attention again into Jesus and keep wrestling with him until we see him clearly and know what it means to be our shepherd.

[24 : 08] And so he says to you as you go back to work this afternoon or whatever you do he says to you like he says to them take heart it is I do not be afraid. Let's pray.