

Mark 8:1-30

This passage is a key one in the gospel of Mark, so we will be coming back to it in the second block of teaching on Mark. For this reason, I thought it would be good to focus on just one aspect of the passage – understanding who Jesus is.

The passage in context:

Throughout the gospel of Mark we see a few themes developing: Jesus' **identity**, and his **mission**.

Jesus has been doing amazing things in his ministry, but his disciples have not really 'gotten it' yet; they don't really know who they are following, and they don't completely understand Jesus' mission.

Jesus says a few times of them 'do you not yet understand?' (see Mark 8:17, 8:21, 7:18).

Mark 8:27 – 9:8 is the high point of the book of Mark, the climax. One of Jesus' disciples (Pete) finally recognises and proclaims Jesus for who he is: the Messiah, the Christ (8:29).

But as we see, they are still unsure about what that will mean. They may have a sense of his identity, but they have no idea what that will mean for his mission (8:31 and then 8:32) or for his followers (8:34 – 9:1).

This is the point at which Jesus starts to describe what he is going to do, or more accurately, what is going to happen to him. He is going to suffer, be rejected, be killed and resurrected.

This is a shock to his followers (8:32). You can imagine why – they have been following the most powerful and striking person they have ever met. Though he has encountered some opposition, he is also incredibly popular. Thousands are lining up to hear from him and be healed by him. You can kind of see why it would be unimaginable to them that he would somehow be hated and killed.

From this point on, Jesus talks about his death and resurrection regularly, trying to make sure they really get it.

Understanding the passage:

Read through verses 1-21. What repeated words or themes do you see in this chunk?

- Notice the ignorance of the disciples:
 - They have already seen Jesus feed 5,000 people (chapter 6), yet they can't figure out how Jesus will feed 4,000 (one thousand fewer people, and with more loaves of bread than last time!).
 - Then when Jesus uses a pun to talk about the Pharisees and Herod (See 8:15 'yeast'), they think he is talking literally, and *again*, it seems like they are concerned that Jesus can't provide for them because they don't have any bread (see 8:14 and 8:16-17), despite only just having seen him feed the 4,000.

- **In this way, they mirror what happens when Jesus cures the blind man at Bethsaida.**
- *Verses 11-13 The Pharisees demand a sign:* It's incredibly odd that the Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus. He has just fed 4,000 people! Here are some questions to think through:
 - What do they want a sign for? What would the sign do for them? What kind of sign do they want?
 - Jesus has done many miraculous things, which demonstrate his *power* – a power that can only come from God, to a person anointed by God – and *identity* (the bringer of God's good kingdom on earth) and love.
 - It seems that the Pharisees demand something *more* from Jesus; he needs to do something else to merit their respect, their allegiance. If Jesus doesn't comply, that excuses their opposition to him. This again speaks of the stubbornness of spiritual blindness.
 - This kind of demand of Jesus is quite common today. People often say 'if God did x, I would believe in him'. Sometimes that comes from an honest heart, that just wants to understand the evidence for Christianity, but sometimes it can be a stalling technique: 'I won't accept Jesus unless...' can actually be code for 'I don't want to accept Jesus at all'.
- See 8:22-26. Map out what happens to the man when Jesus cures him.
 - He sees a little, but not clearly. He needs a second intervention by Jesus to see clearly.

It is not that Jesus is not strong enough to cure him completely the first time, or somehow stuffed it up (the fact that he has just fed four thousand people from seven loaves of bread should be evidence enough of that); the story acts as a kind of parable for us, to help us to understand what is happening with the disciples.

They see a little of Jesus, but they don't see clearly. Spiritual blindness is stubborn!

Even after Peter has rightly identified that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ, he quickly shows that he doesn't really understand what that will mean for Jesus.

How to create a study on this passage:

Have people read 8:1-21 and notice the repeated themes

Read 22-26. Get people to draw what happens, in cartoon style boxes.

V24 what the blind man sees	V25 What the blind man sees
What the disciples think of the Messiah/Christ	Jesus' description of the Messiah/Christ

What might the disciples' understanding of the Christ/Messiah be? Where would they have gotten that from?

Why is Jesus so upset by Peter's rebuke? (vv 32 and 33)

Why is it so important that they understand what he is going to do?

What does that mean for his followers (including us)?

How are the disciples like the blind man?

How can we be like that sometimes? (Stubbornly blind to Jesus, wanting Jesus to be something else, wanting to avoid the cost of following him).

- It is always tempting to point the finger at the disciples – at their obtuseness, at their slowness – but their example is there for *us*; we should see ourselves in them too. I know there are things I have worried about, that God has shown me that I don't need to worry about many times, yet every time I face the same thing I find I haven't learnt from my previous experiences. This is a kind of spiritual blindness, and this passage shows me how unfortunate it is. Encourage your group to consider how they are like the disciples, and how they have responded to who Jesus has revealed himself to be.