

**Trinity Baptist Church**  
**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021. Andy Banks.**  
**Mark 8:22-33 - Jesus, the opener of blind eyes**

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, and today we reach the passage that contains the central question we've been asking through this series, and around which the whole Gospel of Mark is shaped. So, because it's so important, we're actually going to dwell in and around this section for a few weeks, considering it from different angles. But let's read from Mark 8:22-33.

**[Read Mark 8:22-33]**

*22 They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.*  
*23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?'*  
*24 He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.'*  
*25 Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Don't even go into the village.'*  
*27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'*  
*28 They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'*  
*29 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'*  
*Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'*  
*30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*  
*31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.*  
*32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*  
*33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'*

**[Pray]**

Just as there were two types of deafness in the passage we looked at last week, so there are two types of blindness in these verses – the physical blindness of the man Jesus healed, and the spiritual blindness of Peter and the other disciples regarding the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. And Mark may have deliberately put these two accounts consecutively so that the healing of the blind man might serve as an acted-out parable for the disciples' need to see clearly.

Let's have a look at the physical blindness first. There are a number of similarities to the healing of the deaf man that we looked at last week: again, Jesus responds primarily to the faith of the man's *friends*; again, he takes the man away from the crowds; again, he uses spittle within the healing process; and again, he orders the man not to tell anyone about the healing. We don't know for certain why he did any of these things, though he probably didn't want the healing known because the risk was growing that the Jews might seek to force him into becoming a revolutionary leader against the Romans, rather than the self-sacrificing Messiah he came to be. That may be why Jesus took the man away by himself, although he may also have done that simply to give him some privacy and quiet to enable him to better understand what Jesus was doing.

Similarly, Jesus may have spat on the man's eyes and touched them so as to fully involve the man in the healing process. What is certain is that the spit did not heal the man; the power of God displayed in Jesus healed him. Touch is particularly important to blind people – even more so than hearing – and so, leading the

man by the hand, spitting on his eyes and touching them with his hands were all ways of offering to this man an understanding of what was happening.

However, this healing miracle is unique in the Gospels in that it happened in two stages. When Jesus first touched the man's eyes, he received, or received back, *some* sight, but it was vague and blurry, such that people looked like trees walking around. Some suggest this might be due to the man's limited faith, but that seems unlikely, given that there are many other examples of complete first-time healings in response to very sketchy faith, and Jesus himself declared that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

Others see in this detail an encouragement to keep praying for complete healing if it doesn't come all at once. Persistence in prayer is certainly important, and we have known a number of examples of healings that have happened over time through *our* prayers. In this regard, we should note that the most important detail of this healing is not that it happened in two stages, but that Jesus didn't stop until it was complete. However, vital as this lesson might be, it remains an unsatisfactory explanation of this two-stage miracle, not least because the two stages happened almost immediately, not over a period of time.

Therefore, many scholars suggest that this process may in fact be an acted-out metaphor or parable for the *gradual* healing of *spiritually* blind eyes. The man's somewhat blurred vision certainly mirrors the disciples' merely *partial* understanding of who Jesus was and what that meant – though, of course, they would only see clearly after Jesus' resurrection, not during the conversation in Caesarea Philippi. Nevertheless, Mark's readers would have known that the disciples did eventually come to see clearly what they could only see indistinctly at this stage. And there are other examples of Jesus' acting-out parables, such as when he cursed the fig tree in Mark 11.

So, let's turn our attention to the spiritual blindness in the second half of our reading. Jesus saw that the time was right to call out his disciples' understanding of his identity. But he started by asking them what *other* people were saying about him. Their reply matches what we saw earlier in the passage about King Herod: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." In other words, no-one really understood who he is. The closest they saw was a *forerunner* of the Messiah, like the anticipated Elijah figure from Malachi 4:5, which Jesus says John fulfilled (Matt 11:14). Despite Jesus' many miracles and authoritative teaching, the world at large remains blind to his identity as God in human flesh and the promised Messiah King. They may see him as a mouthpiece for God, but not the definitive last Word from God that he is. Such a heresy clearly continued for centuries, since it was picked up and believed at the founding of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, for instance. Indeed, many *today* would hold Jesus to be a great moral teacher, but stubbornly *refuse* to explore his claim to be far *more* than that.

So, having broken the ice with the easy question, Jesus now makes it intensely personal. "But *you*, who do you say I am?" In the original Greek, the "but" is contrastive, and the "*you*" is emphatic both in the use of the otherwise redundant pronoun, and in its positioning *first* in the sentence. "In contrast to everyone else, what is *your own* conclusion about me?" That's the sense of Jesus question. "Who do *you* say I am?" And this is *the* most important question we will ever answer. For how we answer this question determines our eternal destiny. Do we go along with the crowd? "He was a kind man who did a lot of good, he was a prophet, he was a great moral teacher." All of those responses are true. But they are far from enough. Therefore, by themselves, they are a blind *denial* of the truth.

And neither can we *ignore* this question and hope it goes away. Everyone must face it, because it concerns God's own Son, whom he sent as the Saviour for the world. To pretend that the question doesn't exist is effectively to align ourselves with those who downplay Jesus' true identity. For, if Jesus is who he said he is –

God in human flesh – then to ignore him is to say that he doesn't matter. If Jesus is, as he claimed to be, the *only* Saviour of the world, then to ignore him is to say to God, "My salvation is unimportant to me; do what you like with me when I die, I don't care." Such blindness to the spiritual realities of this world is foolhardiness in the extreme.

But not so the disciples. Their eyes have been opened to see the truth. Peter speaks on their behalf, "You are the Messiah," the one God sent to save us. Mark probably didn't actually include Peter's additional words recorded in Matthew 16:16, "the Son of the living God," but they are implied in Peter's response anyway, as indeed they are declared by God the Father in the transfiguration soon afterwards. "You are the Messiah." Peter's spiritual eyes seen the truth, as again Matthew 16:17 makes clear: "Blessed are you, Simon (Peter) son of Jonah, for this was not *revealed* to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." On this Father's Day, there is nothing that will please our heavenly Father more than our recognition of his dear Son's identity! And Jesus' warning to keep his identity quiet only applied prior to his death and resurrection, so that he was not forced into a wrong direction as the Messiah.

Indeed, it is only *after* the disciples recognised and declared Jesus' true identity that he then began to clearly teach them about his destiny: "the Son of Man must *suffer* many things and be *rejected* by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and ... he must be *killed* and after three days *rise again*." Before they understood who he was, they could never have coped with this new plot twist! Indeed, even now they didn't really cope with it. So much so that Peter considered it necessary to rebuke Jesus! Imagine thinking that was a legitimate thing for you to do! Again, Mark doesn't include his foolish words recorded in Matthew: "Never, Lord! ... This shall never happen to you!" This isn't God's will for his Messiah. This *can't* be God's will for his Messiah. God had opened Peter's eyes to see who Jesus was, but he only saw with blurred vision, like seeing people as trees walking around.

And such was the danger in Peter's mistake that Jesus rebuked him – before the other disciples because they all thought the same – in the strongest possible terms. "Get behind me, Satan! ... You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Satan's earlier temptations had all been about a short-circuit method to achieving great notoriety. Now, Peter's words echoed the same sentiments, so they must be crushed before they could take any hold. For, without the cross there is no salvation, as we shall explore more fully next week. We cannot make Jesus into the Messiah we want him to be. We can only accept him as the Messiah that he is. And his crucifixion was absolutely central to the Messiah that he is, even though the disciples' eyes would not be fully opened to see its necessity until after it had happened and Jesus had indeed risen three days later, as he predicted. But then, their eyes truly were opened fully, for this crucifixion and resurrection became the central theme of all of their preaching, as it must remain central to all of ours.

"But what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?" It doesn't matter who Peter says Jesus is. His confession won't save you. From all the evidence that we have explored through this series, who do you say Jesus is? And will you accept the entirety of who he is? Will you accept and acknowledge that your sin necessitated his death on the cross? Will you accept that, without his sacrifice, you cannot be saved? It is a very serious thing indeed to reject or ignore God's Son, whom he has sent as our Saviour. But, if you will accept Jesus as your Saviour, on *his* terms, then God's reassurance to you today is that nothing can ever separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We each have a choice, and we each have to make a choice. Who do you say Jesus is?