

## Evensong Cathedral 29 January Mark 8:22-30

About 20 years ago, before I was ordained and still working as a Medical Laboratory Technologist at Red Cross Children's Hospital, I joined a group of Cathedral parishioners in studying the poetry of T S Eliot, in particular The Four Quartets. I think the group was formally called "The GROW group" and for me, who had only obtained a E for English in Matric, this study was an eye-opener. Led by Frank England, David Lloyd Jones and Barry Smith, we analysed these complex poems of Eliot by examining every word he used and why he used it, but also seeing that word in the sweep of the whole poem, of the situation of Eliot's life and the situation of the history of humanity at the point when Eliot wrote the poems. I realised then that what we were doing was very similar to the way I analysed the blood and urine specimens in the Laboratory. Although measuring for a single chemical element the result had to be looked at in the total package of the whole patient and the patient's ailments.

Once I started studying theology, I have found that I was applying the same analytical methods and techniques that I used in the Laboratory and in the GROW group in examining Eliot's poems.

Why am I telling you this? Well, one of the major problems we have, is having short readings in our services, so we often end up examining a single element from a passage, without taking into account, the whole sweep of events the biblical author was trying to convey.

This is certainly the case in this evenings reading from Mark. In the passage we heard this evening there were only two episodes involving Jesus and his disciples as they journey on the way; firstly, the healing of a blind man and secondly Peter's declaration about Jesus.

I don't know if you have noticed, but we never seem to read about Jesus healing those diseases which affect us today. I'm pretty sure that in the two years of his itinerant ministry he must have healed people with cancer, with diabetes or high blood pressure. But the Gospel writers seem to concentrate an awful lot on the deaf and the blind and the lame. This, of course, was intentional. Jesus came as the Messiah with 'signs and wonders' but the people were more interested in the miracles of healing and failed **to see** these as **signs and wonders** as a indication of the coming of the messiah. They refused **to hear** the message he brought. They refused **to stand up and follow** him in the way. So when the Gospel writers started to write their gospels they showed, through images of healing the blind, the deaf and the lame, that the people need to see, to hear and to follow Jesus.

Mark in his Gospel has a sweep of events from ch6 v30 onwards that reach a climax in Peter's declaration about Jesus that we heard tonight. It is a pity our reading didn't include the whole sweep of events so that

we could admire Mark's skilful way of laying proof upon proof that Jesus **was** the Messiah and how suddenly, for Peter the penny drops, "You are the Messiah!" he declares.

Back in chapter six, Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves and two fish. This event is a sign indicative of the Messiah but it not seen or heard as such by the disciples. As the disciples return by boat, Jesus walks across the water to them - surely another messianic sign but as Mark says, "they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened"

So into Chapter seven, Mark continues to pile on the imagery of messianic signs - here Jesus heals the Syro-Phoenician woman because of her faith even though she was not a Jew, but more significantly, he heals a Deaf Man - who after the healing can hear and speak plainly - something the disciples seemed to be battling to do because in the next chapter once again a large number of people, this time four thousand, are fed with seven loaves. The Pharisees arrive at this meeting and demand from Jesus a sign but he warns his disciples of the 'Yeast of the Pharisees'. So as they travel back the disciples started thinking that Jesus' warning was to do with their lack of provisions - their shortage of bread for the journey. Jesus tries to explain but in frustration asks, 'Do you not **yet** understand?'

And so having completed Marks sweeping evidence of Jesus as Messiah we arrive at tonight reading. Did you notice that the healing of the blind man was unusual because it would appear that Jesus' healing was not immediately successful? Jesus places saliva on the man's eyes and asks "'Can you see anything?' And the man looks up and says, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. "

On Jesus and his band walk through villages of Caesarea Philippi and while on the road Jesus asks 'Who do people say that I am?' The answers he receives are varied but when Jesus presses them by making it personal, 'But who do **you** say that I am?' it is Peter who responds. 'You **are** the Messiah.'

How does Mark's sweeping story, his piling up of messianic imagery, touch you? What application can we draw from all this? The answer is given to us by Jesus himself. It does not matter what others say about Jesus. It doesn't matter whether others give the right answer to that question or not. The only thing that matters right now is Jesus' second question, "who do **you** say I am?" And we must answer that question in our hearts before we leave here this evening. We must be able, one way or the other, say he is the messiah or he is not.

Jesus has put the question to Peter, and so I put the question to you. "Who is Jesus?" If you think Jesus is a merely great religious figure who can show us profound religious principles, then you've missed the point. You are as blind as the man Jesus healed. If you think Jesus is merely a prophet, then you've missed the whole point and are as deaf as the man Jesus healed in chapter 7. If you think Jesus is nothing but a mythological figure, then you are hard of heart.

If we recognise Jesus as the Messiah it becomes a huge issue; because the truth about Jesus is even bigger than this, in at least two ways worth mentioning. First, Jesus wasn't just God's chosen one but he was God himself! Until Candlemas on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February we are still in the Liturgical Season of Christmas & Epiphany, the season when we celebrate Jesus as 'Emmanuel', which means 'God with us'. Second, Jesus hadn't just come to rescue Jews but anyone and everyone who would see the truth and trust him, including you and me and everyone around today.

Think of that man we heard about in tonight's lesson, cured of his blindness; how he said that everything was blurry - people looking like trees walking. Well, what stages of spiritual sight have you passed through? What about you? Who do you say Jesus is? Maybe he still seems like a blurry shape to you. On the other hand there are many who know Jesus as a friend as well as a Saviour. Do you know someone who might need help in discovering Jesus as the Messiah, as their friend? How can you as part of this cathedral community help those who are spiritually blind at this point of their lives to come to the point of declaring Jesus as the Messiah?

Whether you are seeing Jesus clearly or blurry – like a tree walking - either way, continue your faith journey towards Lent which starts in less than a month and towards Easter where you can get the whole sweeping story of the life and ministry Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, who died and rose again for us. Amen!