

**ONLY BY A MIRACLE OF GRACE
CAN WE RECEIVE THE WORD**

Mark 6:6b - 8:30

Part Three

Introductory Comment

We have been witnessing what happens when the good news is proclaimed. We have witnessed the power of the seed sown by Jesus. We have also witnessed the varieties of soil and so of response. Resistance has hardened, disbelief is rife, and even when the word is received by the broken and the poor, it is not without profound disturbance, as people's psyches and bodies shudder, and their sin is exposed. Healing can begin only when the wound is opened and evil has been expelled.

For those with ears to hear and eyes to see the journey of discipleship can begin. But how can we ever truly hear what Jesus is saying? How can we ever truly see him for who he is and so come to see God and ourselves in the light of his person and his word? Moreover, the journey of discipleship is a long one. We cannot sustain the journey without nourishment — nourishment which we have no means of supplying.

In this third and final part of Jesus' Galilean ministry, Mark shows us where to find the 'bread from heaven', and he takes us to Jesus who alone can bring the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Discipleship is possible, but only by a miracle of grace.

PART A : The word of God overcomes growing rejection (6:6b-31)

The twelve begin their mission

Mark begins this third part, as he began the first (1:14-15) and second (3:7-12), with a summary statement of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is rejected by the people of his own town (6:3), but such opposition cannot prevent the word from spreading to the surrounding villages.

Just as in Part One the summary was followed by the calling of the first disciples (1:16-20), and in Part Two by the appointment of the Twelve (3:13-19), so in Part Three it is followed by Jesus' commissioning the Twelve. To be a disciple of Jesus is to journey with him. The staff which the disciples are to carry recalls the staff of Moses (Exodus 4:2-31) with which he brought about the plagues of Egypt, confounding the Pharaoh and his magicians (Exodus 7:15; 8:15; 10:13). With the same staff Moses divided the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16) and caused water to issue from the rock (Exodus 17:5). The Twelve, like Moses, are to be God's instruments in conquering evil and in nurturing God's people.

They are to take no bread. This is central to this section of Mark's Gospel. Their 'bread' can come only from God. They are to take no bag for carrying supplies, no money and no spare tunic. All they have and all they need as missionaries is their faith in the one who is sending them. They are to wear sandals, like their ancestors when they were preparing for the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:11), for they, too, are journeying to the Promised Land. They are being sent by Jesus to announce the good news and to call people to repentance (compare 1:38).

Using these traditional images, Mark captures the essence of the mission which Jesus shared with the Twelve. He also underlines its urgency. They are not to waste time moving from house to house, nor are they to delay where they are unwelcome. Before moving on, however, they are to warn those who reject them. They are to do this with a gesture familiar to Jews: shaking the dust of pagan territory from their feet lest they pollute the Holy Land of Israel. Such a gesture would graphically state that those rejecting the good news were choosing to reject the promise and to remain outside the community which was welcoming salvation.

⁶ Then he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey *except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;*

⁹ *but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.*

¹⁰ He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

¹¹ If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'

¹² So they went out and proclaimed *that all should repent.* ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

compare
Matthew 9:35; 10:1,7-14
Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12

Another prophet is murdered

¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'

¹⁵ But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'

¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'

¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,

²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

The death of John the Baptist

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, was tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (Transjordan) from 4BC to 39AD. Stirred by his guilty conscience, he fears that John the Baptist has come back in the person of Jesus to haunt him.

Popular superstition entertained the idea that he may have been one of the prophets returned from the dead. The different opinions about who Jesus is prepare us for the final scene in this part when a partial answer is given by Peter.

The Herod family was infamous for its incestuous marriages. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and his second wife, Mariamne, who was a member of the famous Maccabee family. Herodias's first husband, Herod-Philip (6:17), was also her uncle, being the son of Herod the Great by another of his wives, also called Mariamne. Herod-Philip was also the half-brother of Herod Antipas. Herodias, therefore, was not only marrying another uncle. She was also marrying her divorced husband's half-brother.

Just to complicate matters, her daughter, Salome, who features in this story, married her great-uncle, another Philip, who was the son of Herod the Great by his wife Cleopatra.

compare
Matthew 14:1-15
Luke 9:7-9

The scene is Herod's birthday. The Galilean establishment is there; leaders in government, in the military and in commerce. The story of the murder of John the Baptist is a story of intrigue, adultery, evil conscience, and a passion for luxury. It has interesting parallels in the story of Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah (1Kings 17-19) as well as with the popular story of Esther (2:9; 5:3; 7:2).

We already know of John's arrest (1:14), and we already know that the followers of Herod have conspired with the Pharisees to kill Jesus (3:6). This scene, besides telling us how John met his death, alerts us to the dangers facing Jesus. Set as it is in the Gospel just after Jesus has sent his apostles on their first mission, it acts also as a warning to anyone who would take on the mission of Jesus. They must take on the persecution that comes with it.

21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.'

23 And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'

24 She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'

25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'

26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

compare Matthew 14:6-12

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

³¹ He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

compare Matthew 14:13

The Twelve return from their mission

The 'apostles'(see 3:14) experience the same kind of pressures as Jesus (see 3:20). Jesus calls them aside, for he has something to teach them: something that is absolutely central to their understanding of mission.

What it is that he wishes them is the subject of the following two sections, in which Mark, with superb dramatic skill, portrays the central insight needed by anyone who is commissioned to carry on Jesus' ministry. Typically, Mark does not use sayings of Jesus to make his point. Rather he presents us with a series of portraits which convey the message to anyone with eyes to see.

We have seen that Jesus himself needed to be alone in prayer with God (1:35; 6:46). He calls his apostles aside too. Is what we are doing so important and so indispensable that we can never find time for this being alone in prayer? Is there no time in the day, or week, or month, or year when it can be arranged?

If anything is to come from what we are spending our time doing, it will be because of the grace that is present in it, and the quality of the love that we bring to it. So it is that we need to discern the will of God for us; that is to say, the direction in which grace is moving us. We also need, like the apostles, to be 'with him'(3:14) if what we do is to have the presence and power of his Spirit animating it.

The Japanese word that corresponds to our English expression 'too busy' has two characters. One represents the heart; the other, destruction.

PART B: We ‘hear’ God’s word by a miracle of grace (6:33 - 7:37)**The miracle of the loaves**

We approach this scene, as we must approach every scene in the gospels, with the eyes of one who is contemplating a mosaic, a fresco, a stained-glass window, or an icon. The primary question is not ‘What exactly happened?’, but rather ‘What inspired the artist to express it in this way?’ Various elements in the narrative and especially the miraculous feeding of the people in the desert are meant to remind the reader of the manna from heaven enjoyed by the Hebrews in their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11). Just as God looked after his people and satisfied their hunger, so Jesus wants his apostles to realise, as they begin their missionary activity, that it is not they who are feeding the people, but God.

The secondary theme of the fish is perhaps related to the Greek word itself, *Ichthus*. We have very early evidence that *Ichthus* was used as an acronym for the Greek words for ‘Jesus(I) Christ(ch) of God(th) Son(u) Saviour(s)’. This acronym may have developed in the oral tradition prior to Mark. Or, on the other hand, the fish may take us back to Jesus’ first call of the disciples, when he said ‘I will make you fish for people’(1:17). Mark is also portraying Jesus as the Messianic prophet. His narrative alludes to the legend which portrays Elijah as miraculously feeding the widow of Zarepath (1Kings 17:8-16). There are even closer links with the following legend concerning Elisha:

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat.’ But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

– 2Kings 4:42-44

At the end of the miraculous feeding, as we shall see, ‘they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces’(6:43). One thinks of the twelve apostles, and so of the missionary activity of the church, the aim of which is to draw everyone in to share the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

As the anonymous prophet of the exile saw, the promise made to David was to be experienced by the whole people. The disciples of Jesus took this even further and came to see that God’s promise of salvation extends to the whole world, for God wishes to satisfy everyone’s hunger.

³³ *Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.*

³⁴ *As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

³⁵ *When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late;*

³⁶ *send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.'*

³⁷ *But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.'*

The 'great crowd', the 'deserted place', and the 'groups of hundreds and fifties' (see Exodus 18:21,25) are all literary allusions to the miracle of the manna in the desert.

The words, 'Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples' are meant to be linked with the same formula used later by Mark in his account of the last supper: 'While they were eating, he [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body"' (Mark 14:22; see 1 Corinthians 11:23-33).

On the 'first day of the week' (1 Corinthians 16:2; Acts 20:7), in memory of the resurrection of Jesus (Mark 16:2,9), the Christian community would gather in a home for the 'breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42; 20:7,11). They celebrated in this way the memory of how Jesus allowed himself to be broken for them so that he could nourish them with his body and his blood. To nourish them with his body is to nourish them with his life, his heart, his prayer. To nourish them with his blood is to nourish them with his life given for them, his heart pierced for them, his spirit poured out for them.

They knew, moreover, that in celebrating this memory they were opening themselves to receive what they celebrated from the risen Christ really present among them. To be able effectively to carry on the mission entrusted to them by Jesus, the apostles needed to realise that Jesus himself is God's answer to the cry of people's hungry and thirsting hearts.

Mark is drawing on all these rich themes, but, in the light of the context in which he presents this scene, we must look more closely to discern the key point he is making. The apostles have just returned from their first mission. Jesus wants to teach them something and it concerns their activity as his missionaries. Mark comments that Jesus is deeply moved because 'they were like sheep without a shepherd'. We are reminded of the following prayer of Moses:

Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.

– Numbers 27:16-17

Jesus, the shepherd (Psalm 23), wants good shepherds for the people (Ezekiel 34:23).

The apostles are sensitive to the people's hunger, but they seem to have forgotten the lesson of the Book of Deuteronomy:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

– Deuteronomy 8:2-3

Their first reaction is to 'send them away', so that they can get something to eat for themselves. Jesus, however, instructs them: 'You give them something to eat'. They do not understand. It is obvious that they do not have the resources to feed the people — and this is surely a basic realisation that every apostle needs to have. But this realisation is not enough. Jesus tells them to go and see what resources they have. They do so, and this makes their inadequacy all the more obvious.

Then Jesus teaches them the lesson that Mark wants his readers not to miss. He asks them to give their resources to him. He then turns to God in prayer, his heart moved in praise and thanks, for he knows that he can 'do nothing on his own' (John 5:19). He breaks the bread and fish. At this point Mark changes tenses from the aorist to the imperfect and it is important to indicate this change in the English translation: 'He continued to give them to his disciples to set before the people'.

The miracle occurs in Jesus' hands, not in the hands of the apostles. Jesus gives them back no more and no less than they gave him. When this runs out they have to come back to him each time to receive once again from him what is needed to feed the people. Mark's point is that we do have in our hands the means to carry out the will of God, but only if we consecrate our inadequate gifts by offering them to Christ, and only so long as we continue to recognise that 'apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

³⁷ **They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?'**

³⁸ **And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.'**

³⁹ **Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.**

⁴⁰ **So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.**

⁴¹ **Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave [continued to give] them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.**

⁴² **And all ate and were filled; ⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.**

⁴⁴ **Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.**

compare Matthew 14:17-21
Luke 9:13-17

The miracle of the loaves

How can five loaves feed five thousand people? How can the little love we have be enough for our children, enough to meet the needs of those who call on us for help, enough to create a just and peaceful world? Mark's answer is in this scene.

The parables have been telling us that the seed which we sow is so powerful that it can produce a hundredfold (4:8). We have seen the power of the word of God to calm the chaos outside (symbolised by the raging sea) and the chaos within (symbolised by the raging mind), and even to penetrate beyond death and bring life.

Our calling is simply to do the will of God, no matter what happens (3:35), and to do it in total trust. The harvest will come, we 'know not how' (4:27); but it will come because of the power of the one in whom we place our trust.

There must be hundreds of memories lying behind this powerful scene: memories of the many times that Jesus nourished people by his smile, his compassion, his words and his deeds. All his close followers had stories to tell of the miraculous way in which he touched people's hearts and fed their deepest hunger and quenched their deepest thirst. And there was no limit to his generosity in providing for them, as there was no limit to the love which he showed to them. It was the Spirit of God upon which he drew in his own ministry, and he gave this Spirit without reserve.

By the time the gospel was written, Jesus' disciples could also call on their own memories of how Jesus' Spirit, living in them, had worked similar miracles in their lives. They had found that they too had been God's instruments in miraculous ways, in nurturing people as they journeyed towards God through the desert of this world. We might think of Luke's statement in the Acts of the Apostles:

Many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

– Acts 4:4

Nothing is impossible to God. Our talents, our hands, our hearts, our love, our acts of service can bring sustenance to a hungry world. It is radically important that we know that we do not, of ourselves, have the resources to do this. But it is equally important to know that we are not 'of ourselves'. Jesus, who was with his disciples, is with us. United to him and caught up in his prayer, we too can praise and thank God; we too can mediate Jesus' love to each other.

This lesson is not easy to learn, and so Mark devotes the following two chapters to it. The early Church, in its catechesis, knew of no more important lesson than this for those called to be apostles in spreading the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6).

The disciples fail to understand

Mark explicitly links this scene with the previous one. When he says that the disciples were ‘utterly astounded’, the reason given is, at first sight, unexpected. It is related, not to Jesus’ walking on the water, but to their failure to ‘understand about the loaves’. The link between this and the previous portrait is the key to understanding Mark’s intention in presenting this scene the way he does.

In the Exodus tradition there is also a close connection between the giving of the manna and the crossing of the sea, though there it is the crossing that comes first. The slaves escape from Egypt across the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-31) and then are fed by God in the wilderness (Exodus 16). Here the scenes are reversed. It is the nourishment from heaven that makes possible the journey to freedom.

Jesus ‘made his disciples get into the boat’, but he is not with them (contrast 4:35-41). He is on the mountain praying. Mark seems to be using the boat as a symbol of the church, struggling in this world, with Jesus no longer visibly present but exalted with God in heaven. Even though Jesus is no longer with us in the way he was before his death, he is still caring for the community. We will be safe if we do not lose faith in him.

The Jesus portrayed in this scene is the divine Jesus. This is clear from the words he uses: ‘It is I; do not be afraid’. The Greek translated as ‘It is I’ is *ego eimi*, which is linked in the Greek version of the Old Testament to the Hebrew divine name, YHWH (See Exodus 3:11-15 and Isaiah 43:8-13).

The expression ‘He intended to pass them by’ is also an allusion to the Book of Exodus where the Lord passes by, revealing his glory (Exodus 33:19.22; 34:6; see also 1Kings 19:11; Amos 7:8; 8:2). In Jesus we see God walking upon the waters of chaos (Psalm 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:5-6). By the power of God, Jesus is able to master the chaos. The disciples, gripped by fear, anxiety and near-despair, have to learn that they, too, can cross to freedom, provided they put their faith in him and not in themselves.

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.

⁴⁶ After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. *He intended to pass them by.* ⁴⁹ But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

⁵¹ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. *And they were utterly astounded,* ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. ⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Genesaret and moored the boat.

compare Matthew 14:22-34

Jesus walking on the sea

How often they would have experienced this while Jesus was living with them and after his death. Jesus remained in prayer, and so, trusting in God, he was able to rise above the persecution and suffering that he endured; he was able to ‘walk on the sea’. With him, they could do the same. This is the message of this scene: a message which could not be grasped by their ‘hardened hearts’. One cannot avoid the sense of foreboding contained in these words. We have seen the way some of the religious leaders have gone with their hardened hearts (3:5). Surely the disciples are not going to head down the path of disbelief!

Mark’s vivid portrayal of the struggling community and the divine Jesus coming to its rescue, reminds us of the following passages, taken from the Isaiah scroll:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you.

– Isaiah 43:1-2

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord!
Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! . . .
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?
So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads . . .
The oppressed shall speedily be released;
they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread.
For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar –
the Lord of hosts is his name.

– Isaiah 51:9-10,14-15

As a reflection on this and the previous scene, we might meditate also on the following psalm:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in
from the lands, from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

For he satisfies the thirsty,
 and the hungry he fills with good things . . .
 Some went down to the sea in ships,
 doing business on the mighty waters;
 they saw the deeds of the Lord,
 his wondrous works in the deep.
 For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
 which lifted up the waves of the sea.
 They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
 their courage melted away in their calamity;
 they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
 and were at their wits' end.
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
 and he brought them out from their distress;
 he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.
 Then they were glad because they had quiet,
 and he brought them to their desired haven.

– Psalm 107:1-9, 23-30

A further reflection is inspired by the fact that the disciples set out in daylight and Jesus comes to them only in the last hours of darkness, just before dawn. The impression one has is that he brings the light with him, as well as enabling them to reach the shore, but only after they have battled the seas in the dark all night.

There is a divine wisdom in the timing of grace, and it seems that we all must go through a dark night to make us realise that we are totally incapable of reaching our destination on our own, and we are quite incapable, on our own, of letting go and admitting our own powerlessness. There seems to be no other way to learn this lesson, except to be made to face the darkness alone. If we are willing to dare this journey into the night, God will not release us from it till our entire being cries out for that release and recognises that God alone can effect it.

Yet how strange it is that we, like the disciples, respond in fear at the approach of the one who comes to save us! John of the Cross writes:

How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul is so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favour and not to chastise it.

– The Dark Night II,7

The impurities of our loving cannot simply be overlooked if our heart is to be formed according to the heart of the one whose disciples we are called to be. Love is a fire. The impurities in our hearts and in our lives must be devoured, till there is only fire, till there is only love.

Jesus does come to them, and when they cry out to him, he joins them in the boat. The night is over and they reach their destination. May it be so for us.

⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

compare Matthew 14:35-36

The crowds fail to understand

The ordinary people are behaving in ways that remind us of the earlier scene at Nazareth (6:1-6). They want Jesus because he heals their sick, but do they see the deeper sickness that he has come to heal, and do they recognise in him the one whom God has sent to redeem them from all that blocks them from life? Are any of them willing to follow him as disciples?

Jesus confronts the religious leaders

Mark is highlighting the essential difference between the religious attitude which seems to have been prevalent among many of the scribes of Jesus' day and the religious attitude of Jesus. As on an earlier occasion (3:22), Mark mentions Jerusalem. This local conflict has far wider implications. Jesus is increasingly coming up against the religious establishment.

Jesus agreed with the scribes on the central importance of doing the will of God. He also recognised the sacred writings (the 'Law') as expressing God's will. The scribes, however, claimed divine authority for their interpretation of the Law - which was in effect a claim to the authority to control people's religious life. By mentioning the market, Mark highlights the fact that these restrictive regulations gave the scribes control also of the means of production and distribution. Their interest is decidedly economic!

The kind of ritual washing mentioned by Mark was, indeed, required of the priests (Exodus 30:19; 40:12). It is not unlikely that the Pharisees may have tried to extend such regulations to the general populace, but at the time of Jesus 'all the Jews' would not have followed such a regulation. Mark is generalising and simplifying to highlight the symbolic contrast which he wishes to portray.

Jesus cites the prophet Isaiah against them. In the verses just prior to the ones quoted, Isaiah has already castigated the religious leaders for their blindness (Isaiah 29:9) and their inability to grasp the meaning of God's word (Isaiah 29:11-12). The words actually quoted by Jesus (Isaiah 29:13) clearly distinguish between human precepts and God's word. They also focus attention on the heart. We are reminded of the words of the psalmist:

They flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to his covenant.

– Psalm 78:36-37

¹ Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,

² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'

⁶ He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

compare Matthew 15:1-3, 7-9

⁹ Then he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!'

¹⁰ For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die."

¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is *Corban*" (that is, an offering to God) — ¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

[Some manuscripts add

¹⁶ 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen']

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.

compare Matthew 15:4-6, 10-11

Human traditions must be assessed according to how well they give expression to 'the commandment of God'. Jesus gives a case in point in which the tradition upheld (at least in Mark's portrayal) by the scribes is clearly 'making void the word of God' as found in Exodus 20:12 and 21:17.

The key principle underlying Jesus' teaching in this passage is introduced (and according to some manuscripts, also concluded) in a uniquely solemn fashion: 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!'

This goes against the whole Jewish tradition and implies that Leviticus chapter eleven, for example, which clearly names certain foods that do make the one eating them unclean, cannot be followed absolutely as God's unchanging word.

The fact that there was a prolonged debate on this issue in the early church (see Acts 10:1-33; Galatians 2:11-17; Romans 14:13-21; Colossians 2:20-22) is proof that Jesus could never have expressed himself as absolutely as in this passage. However, by the time Mark is writing the community had come to see that this was, indeed, the implications of Jesus' words and attitudes.

When Mark has Jesus explaining his teaching to his disciples, we are on sure ground, for the focus is where Jesus always puts it, on the heart: 'It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come'.

Mark instances twelve ways in which we can give expression to our evil intentions (7:21-22). The list is typical of those found in Stoic handbooks of the day. For other lists of sins in the New Testament, see, for example, Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-31; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Colossians 3:5-9; 1 Peter 4:3.

Mark finds in Jesus' attitude and in his teaching the principle for resolving a dispute which caused a lot of division in the early Christian communities. We know how hard it is to change our ways of behaving, especially ways in which we have been trained since childhood, and especially when practices have been inculcated as being commanded by God. Jewish Christians had grown up with strict laws about which foods could be eaten (kosher) and which not.

Understandably, they found it difficult to associate with non-Jewish Christians who did not have the same customs. This led at times to heated debate. Some Jewish Christians attempted to force the non-Jews in the community to follow their Jewish customs. Others, notably Paul, insisted that such customs had been transcended by Jesus and that non-Jews had no need to follow them — though Paul did insist that non-Jewish Christians must, in love, have regard to the sensibilities of their Jewish brothers and sisters.

It clearly matters how we behave. A change of behaviour, however, from sin to obedience, is not effected by the kind of observance insisted on by the scribes in this passage. It can come about only through 'repentance', that is to say, through a change of heart. Furthermore, the repentance preached by Jesus is based on an acceptance of God as being a God of love.

Since 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile', we ought not be so quick to blame our circumstances for the way we are, and for the way we behave. It is obvious that we are conditioned in many ways by our circumstances. But, if we respond to them in one way rather than in another, we must ask why. The answer will be found somewhere in ourselves. And if our response is sinful, we should remember that 'it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come'.

¹⁸ **He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?'**

(Thus he declared all foods clean.)

²⁰ **And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery,**

²² avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

²³ **All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'**

compare Matthew 15:17-20

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syro-phoenician origin. She begged [was asking] him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

²⁸ But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹ Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

compare Matthew 15:21-28

Mission to the Gentiles

Mark makes it clear that Jesus' purpose in leaving Jewish territory was not to extend his mission, but rather to find some quiet. There is no mention of Jesus' disciples. A Gentile woman hears that Jesus is in town and is told of his reputation as a healer. She barges in on Jesus and asks him to cure her daughter who as an 'unclean spirit' (compare the Gentile man of Gerasa, 5:2; for the meaning of 'unclean' see commentary on 1:23).

The translation we are using says she 'begged him'. This is a good translation for the word which Mark normally uses (Greek: *aiteô*), which indicates a submissive and suppliant attitude. Here, however, by exception, he uses *erôtaô*, which lacks this nuance. As a Gentile she cannot be expected to come with faith, but she is clearly approaching him as a wonder-worker: she simply wants a miracle for her daughter. For the healing to be a truly saving act, Jesus has to challenge the woman to a deeper level in the best way he can.

His challenge takes the form of a rebuff. She is not coming to him for a personal encounter, so he responds in an impersonal way with what can only be termed a racist insult. All we know about Jesus as well as the actual outcome of this story must alert us to something in his tone and attitude that altered the insult in a significant way.

Mark's account must be read against the background of a problem which many Jewish Christians experienced in the early church. Jesus has just fed the multitude (6:42), but they were Jews, not uncircumcised Gentile 'dogs'. Can non-Jews, without first becoming Jews, be nourished at the table of the Christian Church? It is true that the Jews have a special place in God's providential design. They are God's 'first-born' (Exodus 4:22-23). This special place continues into the Christian community, as Paul reminds us:

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

— Romans 1:16

It is this truth that is expressed in Jesus' words: 'let the children be fed first'. This, and the repetition of the racist

'dogs', sets her back. However, she persists and cleverly takes up Jesus' words (and their tone) by repeating his 'little dogs' and adding two further diminutives, 'little children' and 'little crumbs'. Jesus must have smiled. He does not grant the healing because of her 'faith' - the word is not mentioned. The repartee has drawn him and the woman into a real, personal encounter, and he concedes defeat in the argument. Does this, too, represent the experience of the early church? The community cannot expect non-Jews to start with faith. They must be met and challenged at the level of desire and longing. Faith is the fruit of a healing encounter.

³¹ *Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.*

³² *They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.*

³³ *He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.*

³⁴ *Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’*

³⁵ *And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*

³⁶ *Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.*

³⁷ *They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’*

This scene is found only in Mark. See, however, Matthew 15:29-31

A miracle of grace

This story, too, happens in Gentile territory. Throughout his ministry Jesus has been pleading for people to listen to the word that he is preaching (4:9,23; and possibly 7:16). Throughout this section we have seen group after group unable to hear. Now finally this man stands before us. He can do nothing for himself. He does not even belong to the group who consider themselves God’s chosen people. The crowd, however, ask Jesus to come and heal him (Greek: *parakaleô*). Jesus (the ‘paraclete’) does so, fulfilling the hopes of Isaiah for the Messianic age:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

– Isaiah 35:5-6; also 29:18; 32:3-4

Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. The man is deaf, so Jesus communicates with touch. We have already noted the importance of touch in Jesus’ ministry (1:41; 3:10; 5:27-31; 6:56). God’s grace sanctifies every aspect of our humanity, and God’s healing Spirit acts through Jesus’ feelings, and his eyes and touch, for we are flesh and blood and need to experience grace in our bodies. Jesus’ disciples learned to love him through the intimacy of their day-to-day contact with him. John begins his First Letter with the following words:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

– 1John 1:1-4

They needed Jesus' healing touch to enable them to listen to the gospel which he was sharing with them, and to believe that Jesus' baptism experience was meant for them too. As we contemplate Mark's gospel, let us pray for each other that we, too, may recognise our complete dependence on grace and plead for God to touch our minds and hearts and bodies with healing love. Of ourselves we, like Jesus' disciples, cannot grasp the mystery of God's loving action in our lives. We need the miracle of his healing touch.

Mark gives us the Aramaic word used by Jesus, thereby accenting the truth that Jesus is not a magician, healing through use of a secret language. Jesus also appeals, in vain, for secrecy (contrast this with 5:19). He is concerned to avoid acquiring a reputation that would distort the true nature of his mission (compare 1:25).

PART C: We 'see' God's word by miracle of grace (8:1-26)

This section begins with a 'replay' of the miracle of the loaves — the scene which set the theme for section B. There follow two scenes in which, once again, it is seen that people are failing to understand the meaning of this miracle. Obviously, Mark considers this so important that he judges, in a brief gospel, that the message has to be repeated. It is not a lesson we learn once and for all. Then comes a scene in which a blind man is healed by a miracle of grace. This scene is in parallel with the scene upon which we have just reflected.

Finally — and with this the curtain falls on Part Three of Mark's gospel — a disciple, Peter, makes an act of faith in Jesus as being the promised Messiah. This is in stark contrast to the previous two parts which both ended in scenes of rejection (3:6 and 6:1-6). It also sets the scene for the beginning of Part One of the second half of the gospel: Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his spelling out what it means for him to be the Messiah, and what it means to be his disciple.

A retelling of the miracle of the loaves

The basic themes are the same as those found in the first narrative, Mark 6:32-44. The context and a number of other indications make it clear that Mark envisages a Gentile, rather than a Jewish, crowd. Some of this crowd come ‘from a great distance’; there are seven loaves, rather than the twelve representing the tribes of Israel; and there are four thousand people - four symbolising the four corners of the globe. Even the word used for basket (Greek: *spyris*) is different from that used in the earlier account (Greek: *kophinos*), which was commonly used specifically of baskets used by Jews.

Jesus takes the initiative, for he is the one who meets the hunger of the whole world, and does it fully (the number ‘seven’). The link with the Eucharist is made even more explicit here with the use of the word ‘giving thanks’ (Greek: *eucharisteô*; compare 14:23).

Since the Eucharist was, for Jesus’ disciples, their way of celebrating the fruits of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we might see in Mark’s use of the expression ‘three days’ a further allusion to this Christian mystery in which our human hunger and thirst is satisfied by the real presence among us of the glorified Jesus. Every other time Mark speaks of ‘three days’ (8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 14:58; 15:29) he is alluding to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

While the Eucharist is God’s promised ‘bread from heaven’, it is not something that is to be taken once and for all. It is the sacrament of our ‘daily bread’, and we need to go on receiving the risen Jesus for a journey that begins again each day. So, as in the earlier scene, Jesus continues to give this food to his disciples. It is their privilege and duty to distribute it to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

¹ In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them,

² ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way— and some of them have come from a great distance.’

⁴ His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’

⁵ He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’

⁶ Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave [kept on giving] them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd.

⁷ They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. ⁸ They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹ Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰ And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

compare Matthew 15:32-39

¹¹ The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him.

¹² And he *sighed deeply in his spirit* and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign?

Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.'

¹³ And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

compare Matthew 16:1-5

Jesus' opponents remain obstinate

In spite of Jesus' clear teaching (7:1-23), Jesus' opponents are again demanding that he fit into their preconceptions and conform to their criteria for truth. Apart from the eschatological discourse, this is the only time Mark uses the word 'sign'. Jesus is calling people to believe in God's love. Love is always and necessarily beyond proof, and Jesus refuses to provide on demand the kind of evidence expected of him.

Jesus is profoundly moved, presumably because of what their rejection of him implies, for them and for himself. He has only just returned to Jewish territory to continue his mission. This rejection causes him to set off immediately for 'the other side'. Compare Jesus' instructions to his apostles when they find that people refuse to listen to their message (6:11).

The disciples still fail to ‘see’

‘Yeast’ causes dough to puff up. We have just seen something of the ‘yeast of the Pharisees’ (8:11-13; also 7:1-23), and the ‘yeast of Herod’ has been demonstrated in the murder of John the Baptist (6:14-29). These are the two parties which combined earlier in their determination to destroy Jesus (3:6). The values which these people espoused, their attitude to religion and their obstinate pride and abuse of power, were, indeed, insidious, and Jesus is warning his disciples. They are in great danger of being infected by them.

Ominously, the disciples fail again to understand Jesus. They fail to grasp the message conveyed in both accounts of the miracle of the loaves (6:32-44 and 8:1-10). The only loaf they need is Jesus (see 1Corinthians 10:16-17) and he is there with them in the boat. They need no more.

In their failure, they represent the community for whom Mark is writing. They represent every disciple of Jesus since. All are being warned of the ever-present danger of thinking that we are listening and seeing, but all the while being blind and deaf, failing to grasp the good news revealed by Jesus. If we keep failing to understand, how are we ever going to have eyes that see and ears that hear and a heart that remembers and understands? (Compare 4:12 = Isaiah 6:9; Jeremiah 5:21; Ezekiel 12:2).

The following scene demonstrates that the only way is for Jesus himself to touch us and, by a miracle of grace, to bring us to see and hear and remember. We must be open and vigilant and expectant, and beg for his healing so that we might come to understand.

14 Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread [loaves]; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

15 And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out — beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.’

16 They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread [loaves].’

17 And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread [loaves]?’

Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?

19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’

20 ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’

21 Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

compare Matthew 16:5-11

²² *They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.*

²³ *He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'*

²⁴ *And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.'*

²⁵ *Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*

²⁶ *Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'*

[Some manuscripts have 'do not tell anyone in the village']

A miracle of grace

There are clear parallels between this scene and the healing of the deaf man (7:31-37). Both symbolise the disciples who 'have eyes and fail to see, have ears and fail to hear' (8:18). They symbolise the community for whom Mark is writing and every man and every woman who, ever since, has been called to be a disciple of Jesus. The message of the gospel is too good to be easily believed; it is too wonderful to be easily grasped. We need Jesus to touch us and to give us his eyes and his heart that we may see and perceive truly. Discipleship is an achievement of grace.

The blind man comes to see only gradually. It is the same with us. We see, only to experience more deeply how blind we are. We need Jesus to continue to touch us, again, and again, and again; just as we need the miracle of the loaves to nourish us again, and again, and again.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to embark on a journey, following Jesus: a journey that will take all our lives; a journey that will require of us constant vigilance, and an openness to the constant surprise of God's action in our lives. The one thing of which we can be sure is that God will endure in love. We are, as Jesus experienced in the baptism scene, God's beloved sons and daughters. God is always there to feed us when we are hungry, and to respond to our cry to hear and to see.

This healing can be mediated through others, but it is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who can heal. Hence, once again, the insistence on silence. We can draw others to Jesus, but we cannot substitute for him. Discipleship is within the community, but it must be personal. Hearing about Jesus from others is not enough, and there is grave danger, then and still, that the message will be distorted, in the telling or in the hearing (compare commentary on 1:25).

PART D: Jesus acknowledged as the Messiah

There is a dramatic power in the very setting of this scene. We are at Caesarea Philippi, near the source of the Jordan river at the foot of Mount Hermon, and as far away from Jerusalem as one can get without leaving Jewish territory. The town was built by Herod Philip II, another of the sons of Herod the Great, around the time of Jesus' birth. He built it in honour of Caesar (Augustus), but included his own name to distinguish it from the other Caesarea on the coast which was the centre of Roman administration in Palestine. This latter Caesarea is mentioned often in the Acts, beginning at 8:40. Caesarea Philippi stood on the site of an ancient grotto dedicated to the god Pan.

For centuries the Jews had looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah was imagined in many different ways: some thought of him as an anointed king who would bring about God's reign over the whole earth; others as an anointed priest who would sanctify the world; yet others as an anointed prophet who would fully reveal God's word (see commentary on Mark 1:1).

The religious leaders and those who supported the rule of Herod Antipas in Galilee are determined to destroy Jesus (3:6). Jesus' relatives have tried to restrain him (3:21), and the people of his own town have taken offence at him (6:3). We have seen that Jesus' own disciples continue to fail to understand him (4:13; 6:52; 8:17-21).

Jesus has been preaching the good news by word and deed. The time has come to journey to Jerusalem to confront the temple hierarchy there and to face the consequences. Is he to journey alone, or are his disciples ready to journey with him? If the disciples are still not ready, should he wait?

There have been questions about Jesus from the beginning of the gospel. After his first act of healing, the crowd ask:

What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.

- Mark 1:27

When Jesus declares the sins of the paralysed man to be forgiven, the scribes were asking themselves:

Why does this fellow speak in this way?

- Mark 2:7

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'

28 And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

29 He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'

30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

compare
Matthew 16:13-20
Luke 9:18-21

Jesus is the Messiah

When Jesus calms the sea, the disciples said to one another:

Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

– Mark 4:41

When Jesus teaches in his home synagogue, many asked:

Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?

– Mark 6:2

It is now Jesus' turn to ask the question. He asks first 'Who do people say that I am?', and the answer takes us back to the beginning of this part (6:14-16). He then asks: 'But who do *you* say that I am?' It is a very personal question, a question one asks only of those one loves. Peter, in an act of trusting love, tells Jesus that, for him, Jesus is the Messiah.

In calling Jesus the Messiah (the 'Christ'), Peter is saying that Jesus is the one for whom he and the Jewish people have been waiting. Jesus is the one who is fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of Israel. He is the one of whom Peter's parents and grandparents had spoken, the anointed one of God, the one in whom God's Spirit dwells.

How does Peter know? Because he has watched Jesus love. He has watched Jesus pray. He has watched Jesus reach out to the poor and the lonely and the sick and the disturbed. Peter can no longer think of God without thinking of Jesus, without seeing the face of God in the face of Jesus, and without finding in Jesus the one who fills up his senses with the aroma (the 'chrism') of God (see the commentary on 1:1).

From the beginning, Jesus has responded to any Messianic claim with an injunction demanding silence (1:25; 1:44; 3:12; 7:36; 8:26). He reacts in the same way to Peter's answer (8:30). But at least Peter's response is an act of trusting love in Jesus. The implied commitment to follow Jesus, allows Jesus to begin instructing him and any of the others who choose to join him in what it means to be God's Messiah, and also in what it means to be his disciple. It is to this subject that Mark now moves in the second half of his gospel

Jesus does not ask: Who do your parents say that I am? or: Who does your Church say that I am? He does not ask: Who are you expected to say that I am? or: Who would you like to say that I am? He does not even ask: Who were you accustomed to say that I am? This question penetrates to the depths of our hearts and tests our commitment. As with any living relationship, we should not be able to give the same answer twice, for relationships either grow or die.

If, like Peter, we can say that Jesus is the answer to our dreams, that he is the one who expresses our ideals, that he is the one who teaches us about love and about life, and about freedom, and about prayer, and about ourselves, and about God — then, like Peter, we are ready to join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem; we are ready to learn what it means to follow him as a disciple.