

We saw two weeks ago that Mark 6-8 is a coherent unit in Mark’s narrative.

It is held together by the two feedings (the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark 6:30-44,
and the feeding of the 4,000 in Mark 8:1-10)

It is also held together by the geography.

Watch where Jesus goes:

He starts at the Sea of Galilee.

The Pharisees then come *from* Jerusalem to challenge him.

Then Jesus leaves Galilee and goes to Tyre and Sidon,
where he shows mercy to a Syrophenician woman.

Then he returns to Galilee (the Decapolis –
the ten cities south and east of the Sea of Galilee)
and the end of our passage finds Jesus in Bethsaida
(on the north of the Sea of Galilee)

So what?

In 1 Kings 17ff we hear that Elijah starts from Tishbe in Gilead
(not far from Galilee)
and after prophesying to Ahab and the the northern Kingdom of Israel
he goes to Sidon,
where he shows mercy to a Sidonian woman.

Then he returns to Israel for the climax of his ministry at Mt. Carmel.

And not only is there a geographical similarity,
but there is also a similar message.

In the ministry of Elijah and Elisha we see a “counter-temple” movement.
God had said that Israel was only supposed to offer sacrifices at the temple.
But Elijah and Elisha offer sacrifices elsewhere.
God had said that Israel was supposed to bring the firstfruits to the priests.
But Elijah and Elisha accept the firstfruits from the people.
What you see in Elijah and Elisha is that the presence of God
goes wherever they go.
They are sort of like walking temples.

We are leading up to the first climax in Mark’s gospel –
the glorious climax of the Transfiguration –

where Jesus is revealed in glory as a foretaste of what will come.

We have seen throughout Mark’s gospel that Mark is showing us that a new Exodus has come.
Jesus has come to bring Israel back from Exile.

And as such, Jesus (and John before him) imitate the sort of counter-temple movement that you see in Elijah and Elisha.

Jesus is operating a few miles north of where Elijah had focused his attention, but the basic pattern is similar.

And just a few verses later Moses and Elijah will meet with Jesus at a high mountain (probably Mt Hermon).

If you couldn't figure it out from his teaching,
and you couldn't see it in the pattern of his ministry,
God sent the two men who most symbolize the whole point:
the Exodus symbolized in Moses,
and the Exile symbolized in Elijah.

Jesus is the one who fulfills all that these two men stood for.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves!
Before we get to the Transfiguration,
we need to understand the meaning of the loaves!

Two weeks ago we heard Mark's comment
that the disciples were astounded at Jesus' ability to walk on the sea and calm the storm.
Why?
"because they did not understand about the loaves." (6:52)

If they had understood about the loaves in the feeding of the five thousand,
then they would not have been astonished at Jesus' walking on water.
And as we saw last time,
Jesus is not really talking about "bread."
After all, what goes into a man cannot defile him.
It is what comes out of the heart that makes us unclean.

This was rammed home by the account of the Syrophenician woman:
she was a Gentile dog – and she knew it!
But all she wanted was to eat the scraps that fell from the children's table.

1. Feeding the Four Thousand (8:1-10)

*In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat,
he called his disciples to him and said to them,
2 "I have compassion on the crowd,
because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat.*

Once again, the compassion of Jesus is evident for those who have followed him.

The crowds are not known for their brilliance, the faithfulness, or their diligence.

They are known for how *Jesus* shows compassion to them!

Remember that!

The good news of the gospel is not that you have been so wonderful.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has had compassion!

3 And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way.

And some of them have come from far away.”

4 And his disciples answered him,

“How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?”

This is an interesting question – especially in light of what he had done with the 5,000!

The disciples plainly do not understand about the loaves yet!

Now there is a reason for their confusion.

The reason is because Jesus is in the Decapolis region –

a largely Gentile area.

While it is likely that a large proportion of Jesus’ hearers are Jews and Godfearers,

we may well be dealing with a largely Gentile crowd.

The disciples think that the loaves are for Israel alone.

They heard the Syrophenician woman –

as she willingly accepted the name of “dog”

if only she could have the crumbs from Israel’s table.

And they could live with that –

it is okay for the Gentiles to get scraps!

But feeding Gentiles with bread from heaven?

No, not going to happen!

5 And he asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.”

6 And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground.

And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks,

he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people;

and they set them before the crowd.

7 And they had a few small fish.

And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them.

There is a long-standing debate as to whether there are echoes of the Lord’ Supper here.

Obviously Jesus’ original hearers would not have been thinking of this,

but Mark’s original readers could not help but notice the parallels.

Jesus gives thanks for the bread (literally, he eucharistizes it),

and he also blesses the fish.

We’re not talking about bread and wine here –

we're talking about bread and fish –
but the reader is supposed to see the parallel.

Jesus feeds his people.
He feeds them with his word –
and he feeds them with bread from heaven

*8 And they ate and were satisfied.
And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.
9 And there were about four thousand people.
And he sent them away.*

Wouldn't it have been marvelous to be there when Jesus broke bread with his disciples –
when Jesus provided bread in the wilderness for those who hungered?

But Jesus continues to provide bread to his people.

As Augustine said,
“In expounding holy Scriptures, I am, so to speak, now breaking bread for you.
If you hunger to receive it, your heart will sing out with the fullness of praise...
What I am distributing to you is not my own.
What you feast upon, I also feast upon.” (p105)

After all, there were seven baskets full of bread left over,
and I suspect that Augustine is very near to Mark's point
when he says that the seven baskets are for you!

“Are you hungry?
You too have been given these baskets.
For those fragments were not lost.
For you, too, belong to the whole church, and they are surely for your benefit” (p106)

As the word of God goes forth from the Apostles,
the seven baskets and the twelve baskets continue to provide food for all God's people.

*10 And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples
and went to the district of Dalmanutha.*

2. A Sign from Heaven? (8:11-13)

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

They are not interested in the truth.
If they genuinely wanted a sign, all they had to do was understand the bread!

But in defense of the Pharisees,
there is a reason why they want more.

Moses fed all Israel with manna in the wilderness for 40 years.
Jesus has fed 9000 men for one day.

Bread from heaven is impressive –
but Jesus has not yet demonstrated that he is greater than Moses!

*12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said,
“Why does this generation seek a sign?
Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.”*

He sighed deeply – this indicates great agitation of spirit.
Jesus is frustrated at how obtuse they are!
And so he refuses to give them any sign.

Matthew and Luke both refer to an exception: “the sign of Jonah.”
But Mark’s point is that there is no sign given to this generation.
Moses sent ten plagues upon Egypt –
and all Israel followed him
(at least for a little while until they started grumbling).
Elijah called down fire from heaven at Mt Carmel –
and all Israel followed him
(at least long enough to kill the prophets of Baal).

Quite frankly, Jesus never does anything like this!

Sure, he heals the sick, casts out demons, feeds the crowds,
even raises the dead a couple times.
But he never does that public “wow” sign that unites all Israel behind him.

Of course, the history of public “wow” signs was not very good:
the whole generation that saw the plagues and came out of Egypt
and was fed by bread from heaven
died in the wilderness!
Those who witnessed Elijah’s triumph at Mt Carmel
promptly deserted him in the face of Jezebel’s opposition.

I know that sometimes we think that signs would help.
We sometimes wish that God would just send us a sign!
But when it comes right down to it,
signs (in themselves) do not change hearts.

And so Jesus will give his generation no sign –
no public “wow.”

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

So much of Mark’s narrative through this part of his gospel
uses Jesus’ criss-crossing of the sea of Galilee to frame the story.

3. The Leaven of the Pharisees (8:14-21)

14 Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

15 And he cautioned them, saying,

“Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.

17 And Jesus, aware of this, said to them,

“Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive or understand?

Are your hearts hardened?

18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not 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 take up?”

They said to him, “Twelve.”

20 “And the seven for the four thousand,

how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?”

And they said to him, “Seven.”

21 And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Mark seems to assume that those who have eyes to see will see the point.

He does not explain it for us.

If *you* understand who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing, then *you* will get it.

And there is no point in explaining it to everyone else!

Jesus words are pretty severe.

Are your hearts hardened?

(Indeed, Mark had said in 6:52 that their hearts *were* hardened).

Having eyes do you not see?

(Are you blind? Are you deaf? Don’t you get it?!)

But the disciples are blind.

The Pharisees asked for a sign and were denied.

The disciples have received two signs but do not understand.

The feeding of the five thousand was a very Jewish feeding:

all 12s and 5s,

and it occurred on the Jewish side of the lake.

But the feeding of the four thousand uses more universal numbers:
4s and 7s,
and it occurred on the Gentile side of the lake.

And in between the two feedings, a Syrophenician woman picks up the scraps,
and Jesus declares all food clean,
insisting that it is what comes out of the heart that defiles you –
not food.

Don't you get it?

Or are you still blind?

4. Walking Trees? (8:22-26)

22 *And they came to Bethsaida.*

And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.

23 *And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village,
and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him,
"Do you see anything?"*

24 *And he looked up and said, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking."*

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

26 *And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."*

Mark is the only one who tells this story.

And he puts it here – right after Jesus accuses the disciples of being blind.

You see, maybe you are blind –
but Jesus gives sight to the blind!

Earlier in Mark's gospel, the touch of Jesus' cloak brought healing.
Now we see something else.

Jesus takes the blind man's hand and leads him out of the village.
Why?

The point here is *not* about the blind man.
The point is about the disciples – and about *you*.

You cannot be healed in the village.
The village represents the Pharisees and Herod.
The village represents the Jewish community.
As long as you remain in the Jewish community you will remain blind.
As long as you think about the Scriptures the way the Pharisees do,
your heart will be hard.

As long as you are looking for signs, you will see nothing!

You must follow Jesus.

Wherever he leads, you must follow Jesus!

The method of healing is also remarkable.

He spit on his eyes.

(Spitting in someone's face was considered an insult in those days, too!)

But the blind man does not object.

Jesus laid his hands on him and what happens?

"I see men, but they look like trees, walking."

He sees – but only in part.

It requires a second laying on of Jesus' hands before the blind man sees clearly.

So long as you read this story in isolation from the rest of Mark's gospel
it will remain an oddity.

But when you remember that Jesus has just fed the multitudes *twice*
and that this emphasis on the feedings of the multitude is *the main point*
of what Jesus (and Mark) are doing in Mark 6-8
then you start to realize that the double laying of hands on the blind man
looks an awful lot like the double sign that Jesus gave his blind disciples.

And "do not even enter the village"
sounds a lot like "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod."

You cannot eat the bread of the Pharisees (traditional Judaism).

You cannot eat the bread of Herod (Roman compromisers).

You cannot enter the village – you cannot live there –
those whose eyes have been opened cannot go back.

Do you not yet understand the loaves?

But before we go any further, let me put it another way?

Do you really want to understand the loaves?

Or would you rather live in the village?

We have come to the very brink of the point of no return.

If the disciples go any further, their eyes will be opened and they will see.

And from that point on, there will be no turning back.

*And 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?
And they told him,
 John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.
And he asked them,
 But who do you say that I am?
Peter answered him,
 You are the Christ.*

His eyes have been opened.
He understands the loaves.