

Last week, in speaking of another passage from Mark, I said that one lesson we could take from the passage was, and here I quote: *it is a lesson in how to read the bible. I am boring on the subject that it is not history, but it is not. But it is also not simple story telling. What appears a rather sparse narrative is deeply layered with multiple levels of meaning. When we approach the Bible with a 21st century – can I get Chat GBT to do a summary – mentality, we are to use St Paul's phrase, looking through a glass darkly. We miss just about everything that matters.*

That statement is equally true of our passage from Mark this evening. With that 21<sup>st</sup> century mentality, tonight's reading all seems a bit of a jumble as though Mark had a number of stories and just didn't know where to put them. The Pharisees being irritating as only the Pharisees could be, a curious account of apparent bread making using leaven from the Pharisees and contrasting leaven from Herod, and Jesus needing two attempts to fully cure a blind man. Examined as a question of what is the simple narrative, one comes up with a blank. Read with a sensibility of what scripture really is, a very different message emerges.

As always context for our readings is extremely important. The chapters that precede our reading from chapter 8 this evening are full of miracles including the feeding of the 4000 immediately before our passage and the feeding of the 5000 not long before that. At the beginning of Chapter 7, there is a story of the Pharisees challenging Jesus for his disciples not following the tradition of the elders. Against which Jesus quotes Isaiah 29: 13 *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.*

Our passage begins with the Pharisees asking for a sign from heaven. This request comes after a long period of miracle after miracle with multiple healings and feeding multitudes from little. How many signs do they need? Jesus responds *...no sign will be given to this generation.* But in truth, no sign will be given because they are so locked in treating human precepts as doctrines, they cannot see signs. One is reminded of Jeremiah 5, verse 21: *Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear.* Jesus is speaking of spiritual blindness that prevents sight of the truth. The passage continues with the disciples upset because on the journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they had forgotten to bring bread. Jesus warns the disciples to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod. What is the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod. Yeast causes things to rise. The yeast of the Pharisees causes prideful religious legalism to rise. While the yeast of Herod seeks to grow worldly power. The disciples, preoccupied with literal bread, cause Jesus to question their lack of spiritual perception. How could they fuss about literal bread having seen miracles like the feeding of the multitudes? Once again Jeremiah 5 verse 21 comes into play as Jesus himself says, *Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember?* After making them recall all that was left over from the feeding of the multitudes, he says to them, *Do you not yet understand.* Again, spiritual blindness is the issue.

Our passage continues with the story of a Jesus curing a blind man at Bethsaida. This is the first time in Mark we read of Jesus curing blindness. So far in Mark, among all the miracles, Jesus has healed a man with an unclean spirit, another with a skin disease, yet another who is paralyzed, and still another with a withered hand, a woman who is haemorrhaging, a crowd in Gennesaret with many different ailments a deaf man in the Decapolis, and now the blind man at Bethsaida. These last two, the man who is deaf and the man who is blind immediately evoke Jeremiah – ears that cannot hear and eyes that cannot see. Curiously everyone Jesus has healed so far in Mark has been healed in one action or declaration by Jesus, but now the blind man is only partially healed in Jesus' first action and then is completely healed in the second. Is this because Jesus was having a bad day or because he wasn't concentrating? No, the two-stage healing of the blind man is designed to illustrate that spiritual blindness is not overcome in one step, it is a process that leads to ever greater understanding that may never truly be complete in this life.

It is a pity that the lection writers stopped our passage for tonight right after the blind man's second cure. Our passage has shown the gradual development of greater spiritual insight along the way. Next in chapter 8 significantly fuller insight is illustrated when Jesus asked his disciples *Who do people say that I am?* And they answered him, *John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.* He asked them, *But who do you say that I am?* Peter answered him, *You are the Messiah.* At least Peter's eyes are now truly open. He has progressed in his spiritual insight. But the story is not yet over. Chapter 8 is completed with Jesus making the first of three predictions in Mark of his death and resurrection. But even Peter who right before says *You are the Messiah* is yet to deny him three times. Spiritual insight requires constant discipline and constant courage. It needs to be built and rebuilt and rebuilt again because revelation is a continual process as is falling back. One has to stay focused on the journey.

I hope this exegesis of our passage this evening opens up some additional meaning that may not have been immediately apparent when you read it or heard it. But let me as this evening's exegete be the first to say the exegesis is not complete. I have included all that comes to me and a variety of sources I have consulted. I am absolutely confident that there is more to say that I cannot yet see if for no other reason that all I have said is so much more than I saw when first I read the passage to begin the preparation of this homily. Let me conclude with a comment about a verse I quoted that is not actually part of the passage appointed for tonight. It is from the beginning of Chapter 7 when Jesus quotes Isaiah: *in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.* Think how often the church and we its people have done that over the centuries. We are all old enough to remember when damnation would have been assured to any man who turned up in church without a tie or any woman without a hat. These are trivial but real examples. We have got rid of lots of that sort of thing including things much more serious. What have we still to discard? For those things are truly blocks to growing spiritual insight. Human precepts are rarely truly doctrine and even doctrine is no guarantee of spiritual growth. Amen