

Really Seeing
Mark 6:45-56

Introduction

When was the last time that you failed to recognise something or someone clearly? Maybe you didn't see your car keys that were sitting on a table right in front of you and right where you left them because you were in a rush, or perhaps you misunderstood who someone was or it could be that you couldn't see someone clearly in a particular light. Our youngest daughter, Ella, had a sleep over with a couple of cousins at our place and they used our spare room. The spare is also my study and so I have my books in there but I also have a large Kermit the Frog figure. Kermit was given to me by my youth group in Sydney and they made a vest and signed all their names on the vest. I have lots of fond memories of the youth group and so I like to keep Kermit in my study. However, apparently in the middle of the night loveable Kermie looks terrifying to Ella and her cousins and so I have to take him out if there's a sleepover.

Sometimes though we can even know someone reasonably well and not really grasp something significant about them. Alison and I grew up attending the same church in Brisbane and one of the pastors wrote a number of books. This pastor's youngest child was Alison's age and so we became quite close. Our friend tells us that when her dad went down to Sydney to lecture she thought she'd take the opportunity to do some study at the Bible College where he was lecturing. She told us later, "It was weird, growing up dad was just dad and I knew he wrote some books but, it didn't mean much. I come down here and people like, 'Oh, wow! You're his daughter! His books are so amazing and completely helped shape the way I read the Bible.' It's kind of funny to think that dad has this incredible reputation when he's just dad to me."

This morning we're going to see how different people recognised, or failed to recognise, Jesus. We also can learn from the experiences of those who failed to recognise Jesus as well as from Jesus' interactions with them.

Invitation To Trust (vv. 45-48)

Following on from Jesus feeding the five thousand Jesus decides that he will dismiss the crowds personally and sends his disciples to sail on ahead. Jesus will spend some time in prayer before joining them. "Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."

There's nothing particularly dramatic or unusual about this situation but it's important as we continue with the story to remember that it is Jesus who has sent the disciples ahead of him by boat. Why is that important? Because the story continues, "Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them." 'So what?' You may say. But notice that the disciples are enduring a difficult time rowing into the headwind and that's precisely where Jesus had sent them. There will be times in your life when you may experience significant difficulties and some Christians have been brought up to believe that if you're experiencing such difficulties then you are outside of God's will. The thing is though, God is far more interested in our holiness than in our happiness. God knows that we will experience real joy when we are knowing him more deeply and trusting him more fully.

A number of people in our church have experienced some particularly difficult circumstances but in my conversations with some of the people they've mentioned how the Lord has used those difficult circumstances in their lives and in the lives of their families to bring them closer to him. This doesn't mean that we pursue pain and difficulties but that we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that experiencing such difficulties is an indicator of God's disapproval or that we're out of his will.

For the disciples, the difficult crossing of the Sea of Galilee is because they have been obedient to Jesus' directive to sail off without him. We're not given a specific reason as to why Jesus wanted them to go ahead of him but it would appear that Jesus is creating a situation where he is inviting the disciple to trust him. We're told, "Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake." Jesus had just before performed a miracle of provision, using five loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people, and thus he had shown the disciples that he was able to supply what was needed and also showed that the disciples would find true rest in him. Jesus now gives the disciples another glimpse of his divine power. Jesus isn't just a miracle worker, he is God walking in human flesh. Jesus walking on the water should bring to mind passages in the Old Testament where Yahweh is described as walking on the seas. In Job 9:8 we read, "He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea." And Psalm 77:19 says, "Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen."

This helps us to make better sense of the little phrase, "He was about to pass by them," because, by walking past them on the water, Jesus is demonstrating who he is in light of the Old Testament imagery. Jesus intends to pass by the disciples like Yahweh had passed by Moses and Elijah in the Old Testament. Jesus is inviting the disciples to see more of who he is and so put more trust in him. If Jesus is truly God in human flesh the disciples would know that they're safe and can find rest even when they're weary from rowing against the wind. The question of course is, will the disciples recognise who Jesus is?

Failure To Trust (vv. 49-52)

Unfortunately, we know that the disciples again fail to recognise who Jesus is. We read, "He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for

they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” To an extent we can understand the disciples not recognising Jesus, it’s dark, they’re tired and here is a figure passing them by in the middle of the lake. Believing it’s a ghost seems pretty reasonable to me!

Let’s take note of a few important details. First, what is Jesus’ response to the fear of the disciples? Jesus encourages them, “Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’” Although Mark has a habit of using ‘immediately’ in a broader way than just ‘straight away,’ (it can also mean compelled or required, amongst other meanings, in Mark’s Gospel) I think it would be fair to say that Jesus seeks to comfort and encourage his disciples quickly. We should take heart that Jesus’ first response to the fear of the disciples was not to berate them or simply to ignore them, Jesus meets them in their needs. Most of us will have experiences in life which we don’t understand and can leave us feeling bewildered. Do we listen for Jesus and his assurance in those moments? Will we hear Jesus say to us, “I’m with you as you go to surgery, be still and rest in me.” “I know that obeying my prompts to speak up about me to your neighbours is scary and can make you feel rejected but I’m here with you.” We can be encouraged that Jesus’ words of peace and comfort in our lives do not rest on us or our feelings. We may even miss seeing what Jesus is doing at times but he is still faithful and his care for us is constant.

Next, as Jesus climbs into the boat the wind dies down. Jesus, like he did when he fed the five thousand a few hours earlier, is showing that he has the power to provide what people need and also to give them rest. Jesus providing food and granting rest was also designed to point people back to the Old Testament and what Yahweh did then. In the Old Testament Yahweh had provided the Israelites with manna, a type of bread which sustained them through the wilderness, before Yahweh opened the way for them to enter the land of Canaan which was to be a place of rest. The disciples were tired and were struggling to row against the wind, what they needed was for the wind to stop. Jesus provides them with what they need and so is the One to grant them rest.

It's not completely easy for us to see the significance of how Jesus is presenting himself because we're not as familiar with the Old Testament as what Jesus' disciples were but time and time again Jesus is performing the tasks that were reserved for Yahweh. Jesus is identifying himself with the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The last part of these few verses reads, "They [the disciples] were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." So what is it that's actually being criticised in the disciples here? I don't think the disciples are being criticised for not recognising Jesus when he was walking on the water nor even of being afraid when they didn't recognise him. However, this section reads to me that the disciples are criticised for being amazed (for not really understanding) even after Jesus comforts them, identifies who he is, and provides them with what they need (the wind to cease) and for giving them rest.

The disciples were amazed that Jesus could do this because they didn't understand the significance of the rest and provision they had received when Jesus fed the five thousand a few hours earlier. While it can be easy to look at the disciples response and ask, "Come on! What's it going to take?" We should remember that we stand after the death and resurrection of Jesus and look back. With the Holy Spirit working in us to understand God's Word we have a benefit which the disciples didn't have, even though they could have recognised the Old Testament connections better than us.

And just as we can be encouraged that Jesus cares for his disciples and seeks to comfort them when they're afraid, so we can also have greater hope because Jesus doesn't give up on people when they don't fully grasp who he is. The disciples followed Jesus and in many ways trusted him but they didn't really get that they were to trust him as Yahweh. They couldn't get their heads around Jesus being Emmanuel, God in human flesh. We may love Jesus and be seeking to follow him and yet there will be times when Jesus does things which surprise and confuse us. Let us learn to remain humble and allow Jesus to continue to shape our understanding of who he is and be encouraged that his is patient with us like he was with his disciples.

Response Of Trust (vv. 53-56)

This little section concludes with the account of what happened when they landed at Gennesaraet, “When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried those who were ill on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went – into villages, towns or countryside – they placed those who were ill in the market-places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.”

The crowds provide an interesting contrast to the disciples. The crowds are not as committed to Jesus as the disciples, they don't follow him as closely, they don't hear his teaching as clearly. However, here we're told that the people recognised Jesus. The people recognised Jesus and immediately show a trusting response. Their trust may have been limited (they didn't fully understand who Jesus was or the commitment he was looking for) but they trusted Jesus enough to bring to him all the sick of the area.

The crowds are not always presented positively in the Gospels. The crowds can be described as clamouring, demanding, superficial and easily swayed. However, the crowds can also be presented as those of simple faith who wanted Jesus to help them and trusted that he could. Jesus is consistently presented as being more popular with the crowds than with the people in authority.

In this story the critical issue is that the crowds recognised Jesus and so put their trust in him whereas the disciples didn't recognise Jesus and couldn't grasp the significance of who Jesus truly is and depth of trust which that warranted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this little story should actually be a source of comfort and encouragement for Christians. We can be comforted that difficult circumstances don't mean that we're outside of God's plan but rather difficult circumstance can come

about because we're obedient. We should be thankful that, despite the fact we don't always grasp accurately who Jesus is, he meets us in our need and brings us peace and courage. We should be challenged by the fact that Jesus is so much larger than our comprehension and there is always more about Jesus to learn. And we are to be humble, knowing that we are called to have the faith of a child or the simple faith of the crowd who, despite having so much more to learn, put their trust in Jesus and that was sufficient for them to receive Jesus' healing.

[Confession to close]