

THE GOSPEL OF MARK - PRESENTATION 8

MIRACLES, MISUNDERSTANDING, AND TRAVELS IN PAGANS LANDS

I. The feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:34-44)

A. This feeding is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, indicating its importance in early Christian thought. Matthew and Mark describe this and another miraculous feeding that begin and end a series of miracles that prepare the way for Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah.

B. The reference to the people being like sheep without a shepherd recalls the prayer of Moses that, when he was gone, God would send a shepherd for His people. Num 17:17. The prophets also criticized the corrupt and/or lazy leaders of Israel, calling them false shepherds, and promising that God Himself would shepherd the people and send them true shepherds. See Ezekiel 34:1 ff ; Jer. 23:1 ff

C. The scene also recalls God's provision of manna and quail for His people in the desert. The fish here replace the quail, who were blown in from the Sea for the Chosen People in the desert. However, here the trusting confidence the people have in Jesus contrasts with the doubt so often shown by the people in the desert. See, e.g., Ex. 16:1-5, 20.

- The instructions given to the disciples to have the people sit in groups of hundreds and fifties may also recall the role of the elders who assisted Moses over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. See Ex. 18:21.

- One crucial difference, however, is that Moses himself did not know what to do with the people, whereas Jesus takes command of the situation, indicating Jesus' superiority to the greatest of the prophets.

D. Elijah and Elisha had also multiplied food, but not so dramatically. See 1 Kings 17:7ff ; 2 Kings 4:42-44.

E. The reference to taking, blessing, breaking, and distributing the bread foreshadows the institution of the Eucharist. The language of Matthew, Mark, and Luke describing the institution of the Eucharist is very similar. See Matt. 26:26ff; Mark 14:22ff; Luke 22:19-20. The fact that He gave the bread to the apostles to distribute foreshadows the fact that priests would have the ability to make the Eucharist available.

II. Walking on Water (Mark 6:45-52)

A. This miracle, like the first sea miracle, begins a second series of five miracles that ends with a miraculous feeding.

- In this case, the disciples are in the boat alone, as Jesus takes the opportunity to pray alone. However, His prayer does not make Him inattentive to the needs of others.

- The disciples are crossing the sea to the northern side, apparently because they too are trying to get away for some time alone.

- The miracle occurs between 3 and 6 a.m. (The fourth watch.)

B. Jesus shows His divinity both by walking on the water (recalling the power of God over the waters) and His identification of Himself. His words "It is I" in Greek (ego eimi) are the same as the words for "I am," which is translated Yahweh in Hebrew. These words recall the phrase God uses to identify Himself to Moses at the burning bush, "I am who am." Ex. 3:14.

C. The phrase "Do not be afraid" is similar to the words angels who represented God would often speak to people, who would rightfully be frightened by their overpowering light and holiness. See, e.g., Judges 6:22-23; Tobit 12:16; Luke 1:13.

- Likewise, God also spoke those words to His people and prophets, telling them not to fear their enemies See, e.g., Psalm 27:1; Jer 42:11; Ezekiel 2:5-6; Acts 18:9.

D. Mark emphasizes the Apostle's difficulty in understanding who Jesus is. The parallel account in Matthew focuses more on their gradual enlightenment.

E. Building on the previously mentioned analogy between the Apostles' boat and the Church, this account would apply more to the Church struggling against frustrations and a seeming inability to make progress.

III. Healings at Genessaret (Mark 6:53-56)

A. Probably due to the winds, the boat lands slightly south of where the Apostles had intended. Back in Galilee, Jesus and His

Apostles are once again beset by the crowds. There is here an even more rushed, hurried environment.

B. As with the cure of the woman with hemorrhage, people have great faith in the healing power of even things belonging to a holy man, although they do not seem to understand that Jesus is greater.

C. While the prophets of old had performed healings (see, e.g., 2 Kings 5; Isaiah 38:1-7), the ease and rapidity of these healings is unique. They recall the blessings of the presence of the ark of the covenant, see 2 Sam. 6:11, and God providing for the cures of His people in the new creation. See Ezekiel 47:12.

IV. Controversy over the traditions of the elders (Mark 7:1-23)

A. The background to this controversy is twofold. First, certain things (e.g., contact with a corpse) made a person ritually unclean until he was purified. And any contact with an unclean person made one unclean. See Num. 19:22. So the Pharisees added a number of rules to be absolutely sure that people contracted no uncleanness. In addition, the priests had to purify their hands and feet before any sacrifices. See Ex. 30:17ff; Isaiah 52:11.

- Positively the Pharisees wanted all people to observe the rules of holiness. However, they missed the point. The idea of these rules was to set aside the people of God as sacred, as well as to prevent contagious diseases. The Pharisees elevated their own rules above all else.

- The fact that Mark had to explain the traditions is further evidence that his audience was primarily from the pagan converts.

- Typical for Mark he also records the exact word qorban. According to this tradition, a person could dedicate property to the Temple and thus protect it from creditors or any other obligation. It was rightfully used when a free gift, but could be used to get out of obligations.

B. Jesus did not object to the notion of human traditions themselves. In fact, He seemed to have engaged in the purifications; it was His disciples who did not. Rather, He condemns the elevation of these traditions above God's laws and especially above charity.

C. Jesus quotes from one of Isaiah's prophecies of the fall of Jerusalem. Isaiah 29:1-16. But that prophecy is followed by a prophecy of renewal. Isaiah 29:17-24. Mark emphasizes the overall theme of renewal through struggle.

D. But Jesus then goes further and declares all food to be clean. The old law had declared a number of animals to be ritually unclean and thus forbidden as food (e.g., pigs, camels, shellfish, owls, crows, bats, and winged insects). Lev. 19; Deut. 14. Since God had given these laws to His People and emphasized their importance in setting His people apart, see Daniel 1:8-16; 1 Macc 1:62-63, it was an implicit claim to divinity to revoke them.

- The apostles would not fully understand the implications of Jesus' words until the council of Jerusalem. See Acts 15:3-29. Mark especially emphasizes the Apostle's difficulty in understanding Jesus.

- Jesus was now building upon the old ritual law, which set His people apart from the pagans and helped avoid physical diseases, with a new instruction about the heart that would even more set His people apart and protect them from spiritual diseases.

E. This episode is followed by extensive travel in pagan territory. Part of the reason for these travels was simply for Jesus and His disciples to get much needed rest and to avoid the crowds whose expectations for an earthly king were erroneous. Part of the reason also was probably to get the Apostles used to the Gentile territory that they would be ministering to. The connection between declaring all foods clean and the call of all people into the holiness of God is emphasized in a later vision of Peter. See Acts 10:10.

V. Cure of the Syrophenician woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-30)

A. This exorcism takes place about 30 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee, in pagan territory. Jesus' reputation has spread here, but He is not besieged by as many requests.

B. Like the synagogue official and the woman with hemorrhage, the woman falls down at Jesus' feet, as sign of reverence.

C. Jesus' discourse with the woman seems harsh, but makes sense in the light of salvation history.

1. The reference to dogs is better translated "small household dogs" or even "puppies." It is not as harsh as it sounds, but is

still somewhat belittling.

2. Part of the idea is that Jesus' words were first to be proclaimed to Israel and her history was to be fulfilled by His cross and resurrection. Once the history of the old Israel was fulfilled, the new Israel would be established by inclusion of all nations. The woman is asking for an exception to the schedule of salvation.

3. Through her humility and faith, she gains this exception. Mark consistently presents these conditions of humility and faith as keys to achieving great effects.

4. There is a great irony here, for the self-described small dog demonstrates faith that the children of Israel generally do not have.

D. In this case, Jesus heals at a distance, which is unusual for Him, especially as described in Mark. The unusual situation in pagan territory may well have been the basis for this unusual means of curing.

VI. The healing of the deaf and mute man (Mark 7:31-37)

A. Mark describes Jesus as proceeding north to Sidon before returning back to the area around the Sea of Galilee. Mark, more than any other Gospel, describes Jesus' wanderings.

B. As with the raising of Jarius' daughter, there is the laying on of hands, a common sign in the Old Testament of blessing. See, e.g., Genesis 48:14ff.

C. Mark describes the event in vivid terms, using the exact words and the earthy actions.

D. The crowd's response reflects both the prophesy of Isaiah that the deaf would hear and the mute speak (as well as the blind seeing and the lame leaping) as part of the restoration of Israel. The comment on doing all things well may have (unintentionally on the part of the crowd) reflected the end of the first creation account in Genesis, in which God declares His creation very good.

VII. Second miraculous feeding

A. This event occurs in Decapolis, to the east side of the Sea of Galilee, still in pagan territory but land that originally belonged to Israel and was close to their land.

B. This miracle is similar to the first miraculous feeding, especially in its Eucharistic implications and the presentation of Jesus as greater even than Moses in providing for the people. However, there is a subtle emphasis on the universality of Jesus' mission.

- The miracle occurs apparently among a non-Israelite crowd.

- The word for baskets is different from the word in the first account, and was apparently used more commonly among non-Israelites.

- The references to seven loaves and seven baskets may refer back to the seven days of creation, and thus be a sign of the recreation that this miracle represents.

C. This miracle, like the first miraculous feeding, ends a series of five miracles. The second series of miracles is briefer than the first and more focused on the Gentiles.