

Mark 8:21

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[0 : 00] Listen to the question that Jesus poses to His disciples at the very end of our passage.

In Mark chapter 8 and verse 21 we read, He said to them, Do you still not understand? Often when we're reading the Bible, and maybe particularly in the Gospels, Jesus speaking, we're intrigued, or at any rate I find myself intrigued to imagine, and of course we can't know, but to try and imagine maybe the tone of voice that was employed, the stress on one or other word that we have recorded for us.

We know that that's very important in communication. The manner in which you say something, the tone of voice, the stress that you give to one or other part of a sentence. Sometimes we can speculate, or maybe a reason to imagine, maybe grounds to imagine, but ultimately it's something that we're not privy to.

But I'm left with that intrigue in this question, particularly wondering on what word in particular there might have been greater stress in that question.

Do you still not understand? You might say that the key word there is understand. Of course that is the key word, and yet I wonder if the stress is on the word still.

[1 : 34] Do you still not understand? There's a real sense in which Jesus, as He poses His question, is exasperated. He's exasperated with His disciples and their lack of understanding.

Perhaps it would not have been surprising for Him, the hostility and the lack of understanding of the Pharisees. And yet even there we see how He sighs deeply, His anguish even in being witness to the hostility and the incomprehension of the Pharisees.

But how much more that this would be true in a different way and in different measure to His disciples? Do you still not understand?

We want to construct our sermon this morning around this question of Jesus. Or in any case, this question will serve as our starting point.

You see, the question and Jesus' evident exasperation arises from and can only be understood in the light of all that precedes.

[2 : 45] The miracle that had been performed, the feeding of the 4,000, the dialogue, the hostile questioning of the Pharisees.

And then we have this question posed to the disciples. So we're going to work backwards, as it were. We start with a question and then we explore how the question arose.

But at the very beginning what we need to do is pose another question. The question before us demands another question. The question is, do you still not understand?

And the question that arises from that is, well, what don't they understand? And if we don't have an insight into that, then it's difficult to make much of the question.

What is it that they still don't understand? And I think the key issue that they don't understand, that they still don't understand, concerns who Jesus is.

[3 : 53] The key issue is the identity of Jesus. And that this is the heart of the matter is, I would say, confirmed in what Mark quite deliberately goes on to record in his gospel in the verses that follow.

And what he goes on to record in this very same chapter is this pivotal moment in the gospel. It's really the heart of the gospel. Everything that goes before has been leading up to it and everything that then follows is grounded in it.

And that is the question that he poses to his disciples in verse 29. Who do you say I am? And this question that we're thinking about, do you still not understand, is explained for us by that subsequent question.

The key issue is who Jesus is, the identity of Jesus. This is what the disciples still don't understand. And hence the question that Jesus poses.

How does Jesus try and help them understand? At this point, it has to be said, without great success. Well, he tries to help them by pointing them to what he has done.

[5 : 16] Notice in verses 19 and 20, and the question that he then asks is in the light of that attempt that he had made to help them understand.

As I say, a not very successful attempt, but nonetheless, one that I imagine he would hope they would still be processing and maybe subsequently come to some conclusions. In the previous verses, in verses 19 and 20, he points them to what he had done.

Notice there in verse 19, when I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, so he's going back to the prior miracle of the feeding of a multitude, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?

Twelve, they replied. And when I broke the seven loaves for the 4,000, the miracle that had just happened, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? They answered seven.

And then the question. He said to them, do you still not understand? It's clear that pointing them to what he had done is intended to help them understand who he is.

[6 : 26] It didn't, in the event, not at this point, but that was the intention. Considering what he had done was to help the disciples discover who he is.

And not only discover who he is, but then draw the necessary implications as to what he can do for them.

And crucially, draw the conclusion that he is able to satisfy them, that he is trustworthy, that they can rest and trust in him.

On the basis of what he's done, to then establish who he is, and then conclude that he is one in whom they can trust. He can provide for them.

This path that Jesus is laying out for them, that they don't really get, hence the question, do you still not understand? But the path that he lays out is a path that remains helpful and useful for us today.

[7 : 34] Knowledge, what Jesus has done, what we discover about what he does here in the Gospels, leading to understanding as to who he is, leading to faith, trusting in him.

That's the path that Jesus himself is tentatively laying out for them when he reminds them of what he had done. So we want to, this morning, travel this path.

This path of knowledge, understanding, and faith. Now, this is a path, it's a mechanism, if you wish, that we can use in assessing other people.

The issues at stake are far greater when it comes to the person of Jesus, but the path that I'm proposing is one that can be used, and we often do use, sometimes subconsciously, in coming to conclusions about anybody who it's important for us to come to a conclusion about.

Let me just give one example to illustrate that. This week, there begins a leadership contest in the Conservative Party. Now, I can't imagine that we have many folk here this morning who are party members who will have a vote in due course.

[8 : 58] Maybe there are, and if that's the case, fine. But just imagine for a moment that that is who you are, that you, in the course of these next few weeks, will have to cast a vote.

Now, when that time comes, it would be a vote between two candidates, because as I understand it, that's the process. The MPs will narrow it down to two, and then the party membership will vote.

And if you were a party member, you would have to come to conclusions about the candidates.

Now, at the moment, it's difficult to know who they'll be, but I think the smart money certainly is on Theresa May being one of the candidates.

Don't know who the other one will be. And if you were a party member, you would have to assess this woman. And how would you do it? Well, you would begin with your knowledge about her.

You would say, well, what do I know about her? Who is she? What jobs has she performed? What positions has she occupied in the cabinet? Well, she was the home secretary.

[9 : 57] How did she perform that task? So you would have knowledge about her. That's where you would begin your assessment. But then having considered the knowledge that you have, you would then draw conclusions.

That would give you some understanding as to who she is. Is she capable? Is she dependable? Is she a safe pair of hands? Is she trustworthy?

Or none of the above? I'm not proposing what conclusions you come to. But then would come a third stage. On the basis of your knowledge, you would come to an understanding as to her person.

And then the third stage would be, well, can I trust her to be leader of this party? I know it's a long stretch for some of you to imagine to be leader of my party.

But, you know, use your imagination and really go for it. You know, can I trust her to be my prime minister? Can I trust her to be the lead in Brexit negotiations, if indeed they ever take place?

[11:00] You know, can I trust her? So you have knowledge about her. You come to a conclusion. You have some understanding. And then you draw implications. And that's really what Jesus is asking the disciples to do about him.

He's saying, look, this is what you know about me. This is what I've done. Think about what I've done. And on the basis of what I've done, come to conclusions about who I am.

And having established who I am, draw implications as to whether I am trustworthy, whether you can trust in me, whether you can rest in me as the one who can provide for you.

So let's do that. Let's follow this path. And we begin by considering what Jesus did. And we'll see what knowledge that gives us concerning Jesus.

And we're going to limit ourselves, of course, to the passage that we've read and to the matters that Jesus himself highlights. His feeding of the 5,000. And then particularly our concern is this second occasion, the feeding of the 4,000.

[12:14] What did Jesus do? Well, that's all we're interested in at the moment. Fairly straightforward. What did he do? Well, he fed the crowd.

Clearly at the heart of what Jesus wants the disciples to remember, to acknowledge. He fed the crowd. There was a crowd of 4,000. And he fed them.

He satisfied them. On this, of course, the disciples unanimously agree. There's no doubt about this. The questions that he poses, they answer correctly.

They remember how many basketfuls were recovered on both occasions. There's unanimity among the disciples. It's as if they might say to Jesus, of course we know that.

We were there. We participated. We know what you did. He fed the crowd. But let's explore this a little further and identify three elements of what Jesus did, all of which were known to the disciples.

[13:14] First of all, his motivation for doing what he did. Then the means that he employed. And then finally, the outcome. First of all, what about the motivation? Well, Jesus makes it very clear what his motivation is.

In chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, we read there in verse 2, Jesus' own words, I have compassion for these people. Why does he feed the 4,000?

Well, he tells us. He has compassion on them. And this is no ordinary compassion. The language that is used speaks of gut-wrenching emotion.

Jesus does not just feel sorry for them, but he is gripped by a passionate desire and burden for their welfare. He has compassion on them.

It is deep compassion, but we could also describe it as broad compassion. 4,000 strangers, because that's what they were. They'd been with him for three days, but you don't get to know 4,000 people in such a short time.

[14:20] They were, to all intents and purposes, strangers. And yet he has compassion on this multitude of strangers. Now, I don't know about you, but for me, on a good day, I can maybe have compassion on one or two people, and that's on a good day.

But here we have Jesus expressing and demonstrating this deep compassion for 4,000 strangers. It's deep.

It's broad. We could also describe it as radical. The crowd here on this occasion, unlike on the first occasion when he fed a multitude, is a crowd largely made up of Gentiles.

This is in the region of the Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. This was a Gentile region. And yet Jesus has compassion on these Gentiles.

A strong case can be made for saying that the reason that there were these two miracles, separate miracles, distinct miracles, or at least one of the reasons is that reality that on the first occasion, Jews were provided for, and now on the second occasion, Gentiles are provided for, and of course there's a message in that fact alone.

[15:35] But our concern here is simply to acknowledge this motivation, a motivation of deep compassion, of broad compassion, and of radical compassion. That's what he did.

That's why he did it. But then also we're told in the passage of the means that he employed. And of course the means that he employed to demonstrate and give expression to his compassion, to feed

the crowd, were miraculous means.

He performed this miracle. In the passage, the events are presented in a very matter-of-fact manner. Jesus gets them to sit down and the bread is distributed.

There's really no text that explains how it happened. It's just described. This is what happened.

There were seven loaves of bread and everybody was fed. And yet that matter-of-fact account or description should not mask the spectacular nature of the miracle.

Seven loaves and a few small fish feeding a crowd of 4,000. We sometimes speak of the multiplication of the loaves, but this is rather an act of creation.

[16:46] Food is created by Jesus to feed the crowd. This was the means that he employed. The disciples know this. This is acknowledged by the disciples.

There's nothing here that they don't understand. They know the facts. He fed the 4,000. He had compassion on them. They know that. They know that he performed a miracle. They know that. Then there's the outcome.

And of course the outcome is that the crowd were satisfied. There's actually quite a stark contrast within the passage that is lost somewhat because of the way in which the words are translated.

In Mark chapter 8, the question in verse 4 that the disciples pose, or rather that the answer that they give to Jesus there in verse 4 is, but where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread?

We read, to feed them. But the verb that they use is the verb to satisfy, to satisfy them. And clearly it's intended to mean to feed them. But the actual word used is to satisfy them.

[17:50] And I say that's significant because then in verse 8 we have this contrast. We have the outcome. The people ate and were satisfied. It's the same word. So the disciples are saying, how can we satisfy them?

And the implication is it's impossible. We can't possibly satisfy them. And then we're told, very matter-of-factly, all were satisfied. So this is the outcome. And the disciples know the outcome.

They were there. They saw the outcome. Indeed, the leftovers that Jesus focuses on in the question rather intriguingly, what it certainly does, or the reality of these leftovers, confirm the entire satisfaction of each individual.

You see, if there had been one person who was still hungry, well, it wouldn't make any sense.

There was so much left over. There would have been no need for a single individual to be anything other than entirely satisfied.

Of course, the leftovers, I think, also serve to just magnify and illustrate the extravagant generosity of the provision that was made by Jesus.

[18:58] So this is what Jesus did. The disciples know all this, and so do we. But that takes us on to the next step in this path that we've outlined that we're suggesting.

Jesus himself was encouraging the disciples to tread. Think of what I did. But having considered what I did, come to conclusions concerning who I am.

He said this is really at the heart of the question. Do you still not understand who Jesus is? And that's what we're trying to do now, to move from knowledge to understanding.

What conclusions can we draw concerning the identity of Jesus from our knowledge of what he did?

Well, let's consider the three elements that we've just noted concerning what he did.

His motivation, the means that he employed, and the outcome secured. We've just noted that his motivation was compassion. We've noted that this is no ordinary compassion.

[19:59] And of course, the conclusion that we can come to is that this compassion that he speaks of, that he testifies to, is a compassion that echoes and reflects the compassion of God.

We think of what the psalmist declares concerning God. The Lord is gracious and righteous. Our God is full of compassion. And when we see Jesus, we see one who is full of compassion.

We think also of the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 49 and from verse 8, as he looks forward to the coming Messiah. And let's just read some of that passage.

This is what the Lord says, In the time of my favor, I will answer you. In the day of salvation, I will help you. We know that this is language that points to the coming Messiah.

I will say to the captives, Come out, and to those in darkness, be free. They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun be upon them.

[21:11] He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. They will come from afar, some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of

Aswan.

Shout for joy, O heavens, rejoice, O earth. Burst into song, O mountains. For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

We read these words, and then we look at Jesus there. And we see his compassion for the multitudes, and we see how these things tie together.

His compassion is deep. It's broad. It's radical. It is like God's. That concerning his motivation, but what about the means that he employed?

The disciples are clear. This was a miracle. There's no doubt in their mind about that. Jesus, in providing for the people, exercises the power of God.

[22 : 15] And as we just noted a moment ago, the miracle involves no less than creative power. What Jesus did on this occasion stands in stark contrast to the two-a-penny miracle workers on God TV.

They just pale into risible insignificance compared to what Jesus does here as he creates this feast for the multitude.

And he does so employing and demonstrating the very power of God. The God who created all things by the word of his power.

But then also we have the outcome. The outcome, of course, is that the crowd were satisfied. And this outcome secures the purposes of God. What do we read concerning God's purposes for his people?

Let's just notice one occasion in Psalm 145. And from verse 14, we read, The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.

[23 : 19] The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food at their proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

And so we see in the outcome of the miracle, the disciples are agreed on what happened. But what we see in that outcome is that we're able to draw conclusions concerning the identity of the one performing the miracle.

Our God is a satisfying God. And Jesus, in satisfying the crowd, reflects the character of God and fulfills the purposes of God. So what should the disciples and what can we conclude concerning his identity?

Now, it is probably the case. I would contend that it's the case that the miracle, this miracle alone, would not be sufficient grounds to conclude that Jesus is God.

But it certainly points in that direction. And the miracle certainly identifies Jesus as one sent by God, the promised and long-awaited Messiah.

[24 : 33] But the disciples don't understand. Do you still not understand? So we've seen what Jesus did, and we've noticed what conclusions we can draw concerning who he is.

But then that takes us to the final step, and that is to consider what implications we can draw from that regarding our relationship to Jesus, what he will continue to do given who he is.

You see, this is what the disciples failed to do. They failed to draw the implications, even in what might seem to be such a trivial circumstance. Let's return to the passage and see what happens in verse 14, which really is what sparks off the dialogue that ends up in this really very demanding question.

Do you still not understand? What sparks it all off? Well, verse 14 tells us, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.

You see, it's clear that they're concerned about this. We're not told that. It simply is described. This is what happened. They forgot to bring bread for the journey on the boat.

[25 : 51] But it's such a trivial detail. It can only be there because it's significant, and the significance is that this is a concern for them, and it's almost humorous.

You know, they've just witnessed Jesus feeding the 4,000, and yet a few hours later, they're in a boat, and they're thinking, oh, nightmare. We've only got one loaf.

What are we going to do? It really is quite striking. You know, they've witnessed this multitude, and yet now they're worried about, oh, man, we're going to be so hungry.

We have one loaf, and they're looking around. Oh, how many of us? Oh, there's 12 of us. Oh, and Jesus as well. 13. He'll want his bit. One loaf. See, what have they failed to do? They haven't drawn the implication.

The implication is clear. Jesus said, if I can feed 4,000, you guys don't need to worry. Look, if I can feed the multitude, I think I'll be able to provide for you. But they're in the boat, and they are so stressed out by the fact that they've only got one loaf of bread.

[27 : 02] They've failed to use the knowledge that they had. They knew what Jesus had done. They failed to draw out the conclusion concerning who he is, and as a result, they failed to draw out the implications that he is trustworthy, that he can provide for them, that he can satisfy them.

But what about us? What are the implications that we should draw from what Jesus did and who Jesus is? Well, at one important level, we should draw the simple yet important implication that Jesus is well able to put bread on our tables in the midst of redundancies and uncertainties and economic meltdown and so forth, if indeed that's what's happening at all.

But in the light of all of these things, we as believers, we as believers, we as disciples of Jesus can draw this simple implication. If he can feed the 4,000, he can feed me.

He can provide for my family. He can provide for my children. We will not lack if we're following Jesus and trusting in Jesus. But there's more.

The bread provided by Jesus was a sign of the bread that Jesus is. Now, it's easy to state that, but how can we substantiate that claim?

[28 : 36] Well, at one level, we can maybe not substantiate it, but certainly point to a clue that would lead us in that direction, and that is the intriguing way in which in the miracle, the focus is almost exclusively on the bread.

Now, the crowd were fed by the bread and the fish. There were two items on the menu, and yet the fish are really dealt with in a very almost dismissive way.

Then in verse 7, we read, they had a few small fish as well, and, well, they're distributed. But everything really focuses on the bread. Even when the leftovers are spoken of, it's the bread that is focused on.

There's this very deliberate focus on the bread. Why? Why is the bread more important in the recording of the miracle than the fish?

There was bread, and there was fish, but why the bread? Well, I think that points towards its symbolic significance, even though that fact alone would not be sufficient to establish that.

[29 : 45] But moving on from that little clue, let's notice within the passage itself the sign that the Pharisees seek from Jesus. This morning, we're not going to be giving really much thought or hardly any thought to this dialogue with the Pharisees, but I do want to notice the sign that they seek, that they ask for.

Then in verse 11, when the Pharisees came and began to question Jesus, to test Him, they asked Him for a sign from heaven. That's interesting. They want a sign from heaven.

They're not asking for a miracle. They had also seen Jesus perform miracles. Perhaps not this miracle. It had been performed in the Decapolis. They may have heard about it, but they had seen Him perform miracles.

But they're not asking for a miracle. They're asking for a sign from heaven. And really what they're asking for is authentication. They're asking for Him to demonstrate to them that what He does, which isn't in dispute, is on the authority of God.

A sign from heaven. They want God to give His seal of approval on what Jesus is doing. That's the kind of sign that they are looking for.

[30 : 57] A sign from heaven. Now, without thinking too much more about that request, let's just contrast that request, a sign from heaven, with Jesus' self-description recorded for us by John subsequent to the first miracle of feeding a multitude.

In John chapter 6 and verse 32, we've read this passage already. We'll read it again. Just a couple of verses. Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

The Pharisees are saying, we want a sign from heaven. And Jesus says, I am the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Sir, they said, from now on give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry. And he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.

You see, what Jesus does points to who Jesus is. What He does, what He did on this occasion, in this miracle, it points towards who He is.

[32 : 13] It points to His identity as the Son of God and promised Messiah. And that in turn points also to the reason for His coming, to satisfy not only our physical hunger, but our deepest and most urgent longings.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, satisfies our hunger for love, our hunger for belonging, our hunger for purpose, our hunger for direction, our hunger for security, our hunger for cleansing and significance, all of these big needs that we have, that we hunger for, satisfied in the One who is the bread of heaven, the true bread from heaven.

As He is able to amply and generously and extravagantly satisfy the physical hunger of the 4,000, so He can satisfy these needs that we all have gathered here this morning and indeed beyond. He can satisfy. Indeed, He satisfies our longing for one who can be altogether trusted. When we're looking at this one loaf and we're saying, well, this won't do.

This isn't going to be enough. One loaf. And Jesus reminds us, I can satisfy. I can provide.

[33 : 53] I am enough for you. If you have me, you have enough. But the reality, of course, is the reality that is revealed by the question that Jesus needs to pose.

Returning to our passage, He said to the disciples, do you still not understand? And they still don't get it.

What about you? What about you today, here this morning? You have knowledge. The disciples had knowledge. They knew what Jesus had done. They knew about His compassion.

They knew about His power. They knew about the outcome of the miracle. All of that they were agreed on. That's not so different, perhaps, to many of us. We know a lot about Jesus. We've been to Sunday school.

We've read the stories. We've heard the sermons. We have knowledge concerning Jesus. But knowledge, though important, is not enough. The question that Jesus is posing is, do you understand?

[34 : 58] Have you come to an understanding of who I am, of all that you know about me, how it directs you to my identity?

And does your understanding as to the identity of Jesus lead you to draw the necessary implications that He can be trusted to satisfy you, to provide for you, that He can be trusted with your life and your future and indeed your eternal destiny?

You can trust in Jesus. He will not fail you. He will not let you down. What do you need to do? What do we all need to do?

Well, we only need to turn to the very words of Jesus when He described Himself as the true bread from heaven. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

That is what you need to do. That is what we need to do. We need to come to Jesus. We need to approach Him acknowledging our great need, our unsatisfied longings, our inability to provide for ourselves and come to Him and rest in Him and trust in Him that He would be our Savior.

[36 : 20] Believe in Him to be the eternal Son of God, the Savior of the world who died on the cross in our place to secure our salvation and our forgiveness.

Come to Him, trust in Him, believe in Him and be satisfied. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Son.

We thank You for Jesus. We thank You that He is indeed the one who can all together satisfy. We are complex creatures with a multiplicity of needs, some that we acknowledge, some that we're very conscious of, some that weigh us down, and others that we're perhaps even oblivious to, but we thank You that all of them are needs that can be met in the person of Your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank You for the manner in which He provided so extravagantly and generously for that crowd in the hills of the Decapolis and how that speaks to us of one who is able to provide, who is able to satisfy, one in whom we can trust.

And so we pray that by Your Spirit You would help us each and every one and day by day to come to Jesus, to trust in Him and to believe in Him. And these things we pray in His name.

[37 : 42] Amen.