

## Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of all, You do not stand at a distance from us, but You care for us and yearn to help us. Despite our varied and complicated problems, You see everything clearly, and You understand what we do not, even things which seem to be random. Sustain us by Your Spirit, we pray, and build us up in confidence and faith, so that we live at peace with ourselves, with others, and with You: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Nuclear power

*Pray about the world trade in nuclear fuels, whether legal or illegal, and the politics behind the acquisition, possession and use of nuclear fuels. Pray for good to conquer evil.*

### On-going prayers

- Pray for Morgan Tsvangirai, the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe
- Pray for Israel and the consequences of its election results
- Give thanks for the joy of worship and the love of God

## Meditation

Where is the heart of faith today?

The will to live according to the Gospel,

To pay the price for being named 'Christ';

And bear the world's rejection without fear?

Where is the stomach to do what's right,

The guts to grasp the truth, and never let it go?

To know the price Christ paid for resurrection

Was losing all to win a crown more glorious?

Where is the wit, the mind and intellect

To search through faith and never hesitate

Because the facts are not convenient;

But hold to what is given because of the Giver?

Now, He will come, and when He comes,

He'll know what we have done with what we have.

He'll know our hearts and minds and feelings.

Will He find faith and love unbound within all three?

## Bible Study - Mark 8:11-21

<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees came and began to argue with Jesus, putting Him to the test by asking Him for a sign from heaven. <sup>12</sup> He sighed deeply from within His spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask me for a sign? Amen, I tell you, no sign can be given this generation.'<sup>13</sup> Then He left them again, got back into the boat and went across to the other side.

<sup>14</sup> Now, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, and they only had one loaf with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup> 'Be careful,' Jesus warned them, 'watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.'<sup>16</sup> They discussed with each other whether

*it was because they had no bread; <sup>17</sup> but Jesus was aware of this and said to them, 'why are you talking about having no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Your hearts have been hardened! <sup>18</sup> Do you not have eyes which fail to see and ears which fail to hear? Do you not recall <sup>19</sup> when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand? How many baskets full of leftovers did you collect?' They told Him, 'Twelve.'<sup>20</sup> 'And the four loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of leftovers did you collect?' They told Him, 'Seven.'<sup>21</sup> And He said to them, 'Do you still not understand?'*

## **Review**

This is extraordinary. According to Mark, Jesus had just concluded an astonishing series of miracles, all of which fulfilled Scripture and the prophecies of a Messiah, and crowned them with a repeated miracle of quite staggering proportions, the feeding of the five and four thousand. All of these miraculous events, from 6:30 to 8:10, epitomised Jesus' public ministry, and could be said to be the highlight of His public deeds within both Israel and the surrounding Gentile territory. Yet still, the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign (8:11), and more tragically, the disciples failed to understand the magnitude and nature of what Jesus was doing (8:17f.!) Was everyone blind to what was happening, both opponents and supporters?

If you have been following these studies you will know that Mark is no longer describing the miraculous ministry of Jesus merely for the sake of our information, just as Jesus did not do these things for the sake of publicity or personal acclamation. The ministry of Jesus had a meaning, and Mark's reporting of what happened, roughly half way through the Gospel, begins to change in order to focus upon this ultimate meaning. In our reading today and increasingly in the coming chapters, Mark tells us about how and why people responded to Jesus as they did, and in addition, he tells us the consequences of those responses. For example, we will find that Jesus begins to spend much more time explaining things to the disciples (e.g. 9:38f.). In our passage today, the Pharisees quest for a sign (8:11-13) and the disciples' ignorance (8:14-21) mark the beginning of this search for meaning. Jesus knew that He was heading towards the final show-down in Jerusalem, but how many people understood what God was doing through Him? Who would understand that He was truly the 'Son of God' come into the world as the people's 'Messiah', not because of any verbal claim by Jesus but because they could perceive the spiritual truth behind His words and actions.

When the Pharisees asked for a sign, they rejected what they had already heard and seen of Jesus' ministry as inadequate proof that God was doing anything unique through Him. They wanted clear and unequivocal confirmation from God that Jesus was the Messiah, and they came to demand it immediately. Mark reports that Jesus was upset, indeed cross, at this request (which is the general meaning of the beginning of verses 12 in the Greek – see below), and He refused to give any meaningful reply. When we examine later what Jesus actually said to the Pharisees, we will discover that He did not even finish His sentence in speaking to them. This was His rebuff to those who sought to test Him rather than accept that His ministry fulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament about the Messiah. He turned on the Pharisees, and simply left them (8:13) with their question.

The situation that developed with the disciples is plainly sad (8:16f.), and Jesus appears to have been upset by their ignorance, coming so soon after the Pharisees' devious pursuit of Him for a sign. Jesus' mind was on His ultimate destiny as we can see from His comment 'watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod'; for the Pharisees had already begun to plot Jesus' death (3:6), and Herod had slaughtered John the Baptist with unmentionable cruelty (6:14-29). In the midst of all this, the poor disciples could not see further than what

*through the list considering the spiritual significance and impact of each event. Sometimes the answer to this may be obvious, but not always, and you may find that the Lord has some things for you to consider which you had not thought about before!*

- *Pray for those who struggle to understand the Christian faith and what it means. Pray that God will open the eyes of any people like this known to you.*

## Final Prayer

We praise You, Lord God, for ministers, priests, deacons, church workers and all other saints of God, both ordinary and special, who guide Your people through today's troubled times. Bless them with love, patience, resoluteness and courage in the face of the evils of this world, and grant them peace. AMEN

had just happened to them, and could not make any connection between such wonderful works and the suffering or death of their master. Jesus berated the disciples extensively (8:17-21) for their failure.

Is it possible, however, that Jesus had to shock the disciples by this strong chastisement? As you can see from reading only a few verses further on in Mark's Gospel, we are only a few verses away from those critical moments in the ministry of Jesus in which Peter recognised Jesus as 'the Messiah'. Sometimes, we may need the Lord to speak strongly to us if we are to come to terms with the true nature of His call upon our lives. This appears to have been what happened here, so we should not expect to find spiritual meaning within this text more than the fact that it points us towards trying to see the wider vision of what Jesus was doing in His life, and why.

## Going Deeper

We will now look at each of these incidents in turn, and they each have a significant and powerful story to tell through their details. Emotions were running high, certainly in Jesus; and in these verses that largely report what He had to say, we see something of the heart of our Lord as He sought to instil in those around Him some understanding of what God was doing.

### ***The Pharisees ask for a sign***

Although the word 'sign' is very familiar to us, and we loosely use it to talk about Jesus' ministry of 'signs and wonders', we need to be careful. Mostly, when Scripture uses the word 'sign', it means more than a miracle of God's power. A sign, according to the Old Testament, was some form of definitive proof that God was speaking or acting. So, for example, when Gideon tested the Lord by setting out a fleece overnight to see whether it was wet or not in the morning (Judges 6:36f.), the Old Testament does not call the miraculous result a sign. Gideon did receive a sign however, when an angel came to him and caused his sacrificial offering to disappear before his eyes (6:12-18)! In this case, the sign was controlled by God, not Gideon, and Gideon saw this straight away (see also 1 Sam 2:30-33; 10:1-8; Deut 13:1,2; Isaiah 7:10-14). Now the Pharisees wanted Jesus to obtain for them this kind of proof from God that He was the Messiah, and they wanted to be able to recognise it as a sign from God immediately.

For Jesus, the problem was that the Pharisees did not recognise the miracles of care, healing, feeding and deliverance He had already done, as signs from God. They were looking for something that met their own preconceptions. They were probably looking for something 'apocalyptic', such as the breaking open of the heavens accompanied by revelations, as written about in works typical of the day (we get a glimpse of this in the apocryphal / deuterocanonical books of Jewish literature written just before the time of Christ, such as 2 Esdras). As far as Jesus was concerned, He had already demonstrated in His life and ministry the powerful works of God prophesied about the Messiah (e.g. Isaiah 35:5,6, 61:1,2 etc). The Pharisees, however, probably thought they had caught Jesus out. They were indeed trying to find a way of doing away with Jesus (see above) but on this occasion, they were trying to discredit Him. They had probably worked out that Jesus either could not, or would not respond to such a challenge, and either way, they would win. They were right; Jesus would not do their bidding, and the Pharisees may well have hoped that His authority in the eyes of the people would therefore be compromised.

Jesus' response to all this was remarkable; the Greek expression for 'He sighed deeply' uses words which express emotional pain and anger (see also John 11:33). Jesus then used a specific and derogatory expression which would have been recognised immediately by those who heard Him; He referred to the Pharisees as 'this generation' (8:12). This phrase is used in the Old Testament as a way of talking about people when they were at

their most rebellious. In the story of Noah, God distinguished between the righteous Noah and his family and the rebellious people of 'this generation' who would die in the flood (7:1); and one Psalm speaks of needing protection from 'this generation' forever (Psalm 12:7), and another speaks disparagingly of the people of Israel in the wilderness as 'that generation' (Psalm 95:10).

Then with the force of His characteristic and emphatic words 'Amen, I tell you' (8:12), Jesus denied the Pharisees their sign. Other Gospel writers make more of this incident, reporting Jesus as commenting about the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' (e.g. see Matt 12:39f.), but Mark reports Jesus as not even finishing His sentence! A literal reading of what the Greek of Mark 8:12 says, is this; 'if a sign were to be given to this generation ...!' This reads almost as if Jesus was up and off and getting in to the boat (8:13) at that very moment! However, all this was said in the form of a statement that implies a strong negative, hence the translation common in most Bibles 'no sign will be given this generation'. Our glance at the original text, however, shows us very clearly the disdain Jesus had for the Pharisees question.

### ***The disciples fail to understand***

The whole story about the disciples' misunderstanding arose from a trivial matter. They had forgotten to bring bread, and we can easily understand why, when Jesus had departed from the company of the Pharisees in something of a hurry (8:13)! Jesus then made a comment which came from His own concerns about what had happened; He knew that the influence of the Pharisees was working secretly to spread doubt and unbelief amongst the people, and indeed, this had been the purpose of their latest challenge (8:11-13). Jesus knew that the end result of their plotting would be His death, just as the envy and corruption of Herod had resulted in the death of John the Baptist. He therefore said 'Be careful ... watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.' (8:15). The disciples were thinking about bread, but Jesus was concerned about the future of His ministry and the Gospel.

It is a little hard for us to read the following verses (8:17-20) because it appears to us that Jesus rounded on the disciples undeservedly, but what He did was not unjust. He went straight to the heart of the matter. The disciples were still worried about the material necessities of life when He had just shown that He was able to supply all their needs (in the feeding of the four thousand). Jesus needed His disciples to start picking up the spiritual significance of things rather than remain locked in the world of the material. This is why Jesus declared 'Your hearts have been hardened' (8:17). In many translations of the Bible, you will find this portrayed as a question, but it makes more sense (in translation) as a direct challenge from Jesus. Throughout His ministry, Jesus sought to explain to the disciples the 'secrets of the Kingdom' (4:11) and save them from the terrible mindset of the people of Israel as prophesied by Isaiah; 'they look, but do not yet perceive, and listen but do not understand ...' (4:12, Isaiah 6:10f.). Jesus summarises this twice in Mark's Gospel as 'hardness of heart' (6:52, 8:17), and it is clear that this was what Jesus meant because of what He said next in verse 18; 'Do you not have eyes which fail to see and ears which fail to hear?'

Then, in order to try and help the disciples, Jesus moved away from His own train of thought about the 'yeast of the Pharisees and Herod' (8:15), for they were not yet able to understand what this had to say about His ultimate destiny (see 8:31;33, 9:30-32, 10:13-16), so spoke about the disciples' own preoccupation with food and bread. He asked them about the meaning of the baskets full of leftovers from the miracles of the five and four thousand, to try and draw out of them the spiritual significance of what had happened; miracles they had seen with their own eyes. He simply asked them how many baskets full were left over in each case, and upon their reply (8:19,20) challenged them about whether they knew the significance of these numbers. The disciples gave no answer, and we can

assume that they needed to go away and think about what had happened. We now know that Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the spiritual significance of His supplying the needs of all Israel and the whole world (the twelve and the seven, see previous studies on 6:30-44 and 8:1-10); but in this difficult moment, Jesus' concern was to goad the disciples into some degree of spiritual understanding.

### **Application**

Jesus showed in the first of these incidents that there are times when it is unwise to take up the challenge set before us by those who do not believe. Not every challenge is worth taking at face value! Sometimes, people will challenge Christian belief simply because they want to trap those of us who believe in some semantic or philosophical puzzle. It may be best to turn away from such challenges unless we have the gift to address this type of argument, and can see the spiritual benefit of taking up the contest. At other times, people will ask us sincerely about our faith, and it is tragic if we stand back at this point, stuck in the material world and unable to offer a spiritual interpretation of the world around us (as were the disciples). It may be that we need to hear the Lord's word 'your hearts have been hardened!' (8:17) before we accept that we must always be prepared to see the spiritual consequences of our actions and those of others, for example.

In the first part of the passage, there is another point of interest for the church today. We should perhaps be careful to bear in mind what the Bible describes as 'signs', which are those miraculous and wondrous events which point exclusively to the work and word of Christ in our world. The 'wonders' of healing and deliverance, and all manner of miracles, for example, do not necessarily point to Jesus Christ. Sometimes, people from outside the church perform such apparent miracles, and they do not necessarily have anything to do with the Lord. However, if those who received these miracles gave testimony that it was Jesus Christ who had healed or delivered them, then they became signs that spoke wonderfully of the grace of God in our world.

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. What 'signs' do people seek today in order to believe in God, and do you believe that God should grant them?
2. Discuss in your group what you would have felt like if you had been one of the disciples during this incident.
3. To what extent do people 'have eyes but do not see, and ears but do not hear', today?

### **Discipleship**

#### **Personal comment:**

*This passage is a powerful challenge to all of us who attempt to understand Jesus ministry. All of us can become so bogged down in what is before us that we fail to appreciate the 'bigger picture'. This happens in almost every area of life, but it is particularly important that we realise the wider truths of our faith, because our eternal salvation may depend upon this. God call us to accept that what Jesus has done for all, He has done for us personally. He looks for our response of repentance and faith and longs to be able to welcome us into His Kingdom.*

#### **Ideas for discipleship programme**

- *Make a list or keep a diary of the things that happen to you over a day or two, try to keep the list to about a dozen key events. Then take time to think and pray*