

‘The Blind, the Blurred and the Blessed. Mark 8:1-30

A Unique Miracle vv. 22-26

Not being able to see things clearly is at best embarrassing, and as the cat anticipated, potentially dangerous.

While it might seem better than being blind blurry, distorted vision is still not a good place to be – confusing, making it difficult to negotiate the world and life

It’s a situation that is worth improving, moving on from

That’s the point of those spec saver ads, and that is the point of the unique miracle recorded in Mark 8:22-26

Mark 8: ²² They came to Bethsaida. They brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and brought him out of the village. Spitting on his eyes and laying his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?”

²⁴ He looked up and said, “I see people—they look like trees walking.”

²⁵ Again Jesus placed his hands on the man’s eyes. The man looked intently and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Then he sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.”

This restoration of sight to the blind is unique amongst all the mighty works Jesus is recorded as performing – in three ways

Firstly, here alone of all the mighty works of healing does Jesus explicitly ask the man about what is happening to him – *do you see anything?*

And secondly, alone of all the mighty works the man indicates he has not been healed instantaneously, but is experiencing only partial improvement

“I see people—they look like trees walking.”

An indication, by the way, that he was not born blind but had gone blind through one of the many causes of later onset blindness – trauma, cataracts, trachoma, glaucoma, iritis, retinitis for example

And thirdly, only here is there a reference to a second laying on of hands.

Unusual isn’t it,

Why? There is no indication that this man has an especially difficult kind of blindness, or was somehow deficient in faith or especially sinful, or that Jesus was a bit tired, a bit depleted that day, or that Jesus was distressed by having to engage in a two stage procedure.

Jesus is in control, not disturbed by the sequence of events.

It is quite deliberate, and its recording deliberate.

In its context this miracle where the man moves from being blind, to blurred sight and then to the blessing of being able to ‘see everything clearly’ is an acted parable.

It is telling us, having just read of the blindness of the Pharisees and the blurred, the confused understanding of the disciples, that not being able to see who Jesus is clearly is a place worth moving on from, that what the disciples who don’t seem yet to understand who Jesus is [v. 21] and we need to do is to be able to bring the identity and mission of Jesus into sharp focus. It is no use staying confused, with a partial understanding of Jesus’ greatness.

And as we look at what immediately follows, Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, we see this acted parable is telling us that to know the blessedness of seeing things clearly and so being able to act confidently and safely in the

world, act in ways that are good for us and useful for others and not waste our lives missing the point, anxious about what is not there – like a pulse in a fur hat, we have to come to the place where we can answer the question Jesus asks His disciples – who do you say I am? – as they do, you are the Christ, answer with clarity and conviction

And it is reminding us that Jesus is the one who can bring us to that clear sightedness as we keep listening to Him

But to see that, let's start with the blindness of the Pharisees

The Blind 8:11-15

Mark 8: ¹¹ The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, demanding of him a sign from heaven to test him.

¹² Sighing deeply in his spirit, he said, "Why does this generation demand a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." ¹³ Then he left them, got back into the boat, and went to the other side.

It seems strange, having just read of the second feeding of the crowds by Jesus, his multiplication of seven loaves and a few small fish to satisfy the hunger of 'about four thousand' people, that the Pharisees would demand a *sign from heaven to test him*.

They are demanding a compelling proof that Jesus has been sent by God. Their demand tells you that for them all the other mighty works performed by Jesus and of which some are recorded in the gospel – his casting out of demons, his healings, cleansing of lepers, restoring hearing and speech, signs of who Jesus is, are potentially ambiguous in character.

Remember, this is the group who wanted to attribute Jesus' casting out of demons to the devil

Mark 3: ²² The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and, "He drives out demons by the ruler of the demons."

They are rejecting the signs that have been given to demand a sign of their own choosing, and Only Jesus doing the sign or the type of sign they specify will count with them.

What does that tell us about them?

They have the blindness of determined unbelief, that refuses to see

A blindness that flows from their hearts

Even though they have an appearance of devotion to God in their strict religiosity, they have to be in charge.

They get to say what is of God and what is not, to be the judges whom God must satisfy before any work can be His work

Like many today they believe they can sit in judgment of what God can and cannot do, and only if He does what they say He can, can He be their God

As we saw with their adherence to their traditions even when it led to disobedience to God, the human word, human judgement, has to be the last word even if it leads to rejection of God.

And it is like many today

Perhaps you have certain tests that you think God must pass before you give Him a hearing, or you have met people like that

Perhaps, like the person I met once while door knocking in Wagga you demand some dramatic demonstration in your presence of God's reality before you will engage with what Jesus says

In that case he was demanding that if God struck him down for his blasphemy right then and there he would believe in Him

Or perhaps you have other criteria of how a God should act

If you are to believe in God then no children can be allowed to die

Or if you are to believe in God they have to be able to prove His existence by science, by the scientific method

There are at least two problems with those demands

Firstly, Those pre-commitments blind us, just as they blinded the Pharisees, to all the evidence there is already

And there is a lot

A lot then

Jesus has already done many mighty works

Driving out unclean spirits, cleansing lepers, healing a paralysed man, restoring in the synagogue a man with a withered hand, healing many, feeding many with scant resources- not done in secret, and not ambiguous - healed

And He has done these in the context of fulfilling the Scriptures the Pharisees said they knew and that point to Jesus' identity, Scriptures like Isaiah 35:4-6 that speak of what God will do, of like Isaiah 61 [Luke 4:16-21] that speaks of what God's servant will do

And Jesus had already refuted their alternative explanation that He is doing these things by the power of beelzebul, by an evil power, showed its nonsensical nature. Rather than being Beelzebul's servant He is His conqueror and casting out demons shows he is the strong man who binds Satan and plunders his property [Mark 3:20-30]

There was lost for them to see that indicated who Jesus was

And there is even more evidence now

The gospels – their existence and authenticity as first century eyewitness documents that let us see what the disciples saw

The disciples testimony to the resurrection, testimony which they maintained even in the face of death

The church – its existence and endurance over the centuries

The lives of myriad Christians – whether it is their testimony to the change believing in Jesus has brought, or their devotion to doing good – now and through the centuries – for example establishing hospitals and schools, the emancipation of slaves, or their testimony to the gospel making sense of the world [Lewis, Keller, Watkins]

One of the great disappointments of reading Dawkins "The God Delusion" was his failure to grapple with all the evidence, particularly his dismissal of the gospels and history

Are your pre-commitments to your own reason or experience being ultimate blinding you to the evidence for Jesus?

And secondly, these pre-commitments and the demands they generate make real relationship with the living God impossible while the demand and the attitude behind it remains

¹² *Sighing deeply in his spirit, he said, "Why does this generation demand a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation."* ¹³ *Then he left them, got back into the boat, and went to the other side.*

Mark says this is a test for Jesus,

One which he rightly rejects, with a sigh

He rejects it because to engage on their terms is to make relationship with the living God, a relationship through faith in His word, impossible

Firstly because where they dictate the terms of the relationship, the grounds on which they will believe in Him, God cannot be the God He is.

there is no room for the almighty, sovereign holy God in their relating to God

The God who is free to be the God HE wills

The God whose wisdom is beyond the limits of a creature's understanding, whose power is incomprehensible to finite minds

For the creature to dictate the terms of the relationship The infinite God has to shrink to the limits of their capacity, of their understanding, become an idol of their shaping

And secondly, faith in God which is faith in the word of God, in God making Himself known to us, becomes impossible, for where the sign they demand is granted at the bottom of faith is always faith in themselves

Their capacity to know what God can and cannot do, their capacity to judge what is right and wrong for God to do and say

The Pharisees have the blindness of determined unbelief, because they want to relate to God without repentance, without confessing that He dictates the terms of the relationship, without abandoning their proud reliance on themselves – their tradition

Or for others, their reliance on their reason or their experience as the final arbiter

Jesus sighs, for the demand itself springs from their rebellious hearts, and granting it will only entrench further their rebellion – and they cannot see that

The blurred 8:14-21

*Mark 8: ¹⁴The disciples had forgotten to take bread and had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵Then he gave them strict orders: "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." ¹⁶They were discussing among themselves that they did not have any bread. ¹⁷Aware of this, he said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact you have no bread? Don't you understand or comprehend? Do you have hardened hearts? ¹⁸**Do you have eyes and not see; do you have ears and not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of leftovers did you collect?"***

"Twelve," they told him.

²⁰"When I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of pieces did you collect?"

"Seven," they said.

²¹And he said to them, "Don't you understand yet?"

There are the blind, and then there are the blurred, the ones who see things only vaguely and indistinctly, and that is what is revealed of the disciples in the boat

As Jesus digests the conversation he has just had, processes his grief at the Pharisees' unbelief, He says to the disciples *"Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."*

They misunderstand because their minds are on the bread they lack – "who forgot to pack the sandwiches!" They are pre-occupied with their stomachs,

But we shouldn't misunderstand

Jesus has just told them and us in 7:14-23 that it is not what goes into the body, but what comes out of the heart that defiles

Not what we eat, but what we think and desire that makes us unclean, threatens our relationship with God our Creator

So There is no way this is Jesus warning about getting bread or the components to make it, like leaven, from the Pharisees and Herod

Buying bread from them will not affect their relationship with God

Jesus is talking about the attitude of the Pharisees and Herod that runs through their whole life, just as leaven works its way through the whole batch of dough, and is expressed, can be tasted, in all they say and do

What is the leaven of the Pharisees?

Matthew 16: ¹² Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the leaven in bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Luke 12: Meanwhile, a crowd of many thousands came together, so that they were trampling on one another. He began to say to his disciples first, "Be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

He is speaking to the disciples because they have just witnessed the leaven of the Pharisees in their demand for a sign.

It is that attitude that makes the human the final judge, where they are at the centre and God at the periphery, where their trust is in themselves, not God

That attitude is Expressed in and supported by their teaching – where the human word has the last say, where they claim to know better than God what God wills and desires, and their word should prevail over, displace, God's word.

And it gives rise to their hypocrisy – for what God thinks of you is not as important as what people think of you, so you can pretend to people and lie to God. For the hypocrite God and the talk of God is there to forward your own interests, reputation, position, wealth – for He is secondary and subsidiary, His demands able to be tamed by your teaching, there to serve you

That attitude of self trust seems so small, yet it affects everything

And it will make you determined not to see Jesus' greatness, Jesus who says He is Lord and should be trusted and obeyed

That leaven is still at work in modern theologians and Christian office bearers who set aside the word of God in favour of their own teaching – whether it is about sexuality or money

In those who say it does not matter where your heart is as long as you do the right performance of outward rituals

They will blind you to Jesus' greatness

What is the leaven of Herod?

Remember Herod, the bloke who had John the Baptist killed because he was impressed by his step-daughter Salome's dancing.

He could listen to John, was impressed by John

But in the end He loved power and being well thought of by other powerful people – and so he killed John rather than lose face

The attitude of Herod is that he has a right to do whatever it takes to keep himself in power because he is the one who can and must secure his own security and place in the world, and questions of justice and truth are cynically dismissed

You will never want to see Jesus as He is where a commitment to your own power, to being ultimately accountable only to yourself for what you do, is at the core of your life, influencing all your decisions

You will never want to relate to Jesus on His terms, as Lord

That love of power is a pre-commitment that will blind you to Jesus

True today as it was then. Where you are committed in your heart to doing whatever you want to do, you will be looking for ways to dismiss Jesus

Jesus warns His followers of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod because where they ingest, internalise, those attitudes they will be determined not to see Jesus as He is.

But the disciples? As you heard, to Jesus' apparent frustration, they miss the point entirely, are not on His wavelength at all

They are worried about their immediate needs, about food – a preoccupation that keeps them from getting Jesus, seeing clearly what He is on about, hearing what He is teaching.

A preoccupation and a worry that tells us They really have not got a clear picture of Jesus yet,

That his greatness and His mission have not yet come into focus in their thinking

How can they be worried about food in Jesus' presence?

That is the question Jesus asks them

*¹⁷ Aware of this, he said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact you have no bread? Don't you understand or comprehend? Do you have hardened hearts? ¹⁸ **Do you have eyes and not see; do you have ears and not hear? And do you not remember?***

Jesus has just taught that they are not going to be defiled by what they eat. Why would eating bread, physical bread of the Pharisees or any others be an issue?

And Surely they have learnt that there is no lack with Jesus. Do you not remember?

Think, he says to them, about what they have witnessed.

And because food and not, for example health, is their pre-occupation at the moment Jesus points specifically to the two feeding miracles

¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of leftovers did you collect?"

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Those feedings recalled God's provision in the wilderness.

But this is greater than Moses

Moses got a message about the manna coming and told the people how they were to gather and use it.

But the bread and the fish multiply in Jesus' hands.

This is the creative power of God who routinely multiplies the products of His creation to feed the world

It is a provision that springs from His compassion

Mark 8:² "I have compassion on the crowd, because they've already stayed with me three days and have nothing to eat.

And Jesus emphasises its superabundance.

How many baskets did you collect?

Jesus has compassion on our frailty, knows our needs

And the Lord Jesus has the power to provide superabundantly

How can they, in His presence, be anxious about food, so pre-occupied with present earthly needs that they fail to listen to and understand Him

Jesus wants them to look closely, to think clearly, about what they have experienced, to remember, to look again

To look again so that they can really engage with His greatness, and what it means to be His

But we can be like the disciples, can't we?

Our pre-occupation with our present pressing needs can stop us seeing Jesus' greatness and compassion – even if we have it experienced time and again

Can rob us of the comfort and security of being in His presence

We can become so pre-occupied whether with our need for a job, or a companion, or our health or the conflict we are experiencing with others – never really stop to look at Jesus

Forgetting those times He has rescued us, helped us, provided for us

Forgetting His love

Our pre-occupation with the cares and riches of this life mean we can have him there, but out of focus, not seeing clearly His greatness or kindness.

And it is on the back of this conversation where Jesus has urged them to look again, and on the other side of his healing of the blind man, that Jesus asks them the key question that will help them bring His greatness into focus

The Blessed 8:27-30 [Matt. 16:17; 2 Sam. 7:10-16, Is. 9:5-7, 11:1-12, 55:3-5, Jer. 23:5, Amos 9:11-12, Micah 5:2-4; Ps. 2, 16, 89]

Mark 8:²⁷ Jesus went out with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the road he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

²⁸ *They answered him, "John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets."*

²⁹ *"But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?"*

Peter answered him, "You are the Christ."³⁰ And he strictly warned them to tell no one about him.

Jesus has moved again, this time to the foothills of Mt Hermon, Gentile territory

Who do people say that I am?

And the disciples repeat to him the crowds' speculation

Some say – vague and indistinct responses

John, Elijah, the Prophet – holy figures, preparatory figures, someone who fits somewhere in God's plans – but they are not sure

Jesus is just one in a succession, one of a group, not one of a kind

²⁹ *“But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?”*

And the disciples have remembered, they have thought, they have looked again intently – and Jesus has come into focus

Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”, the Messiah, the anointed one

What is Peter confessing in saying Jesus is the Christ?

Christ or Messiah means ‘the anointed one’. Kings, as well as priests were anointed [1 Sam. 16], and the Jewish people had an expectation of an anointed one to come.

He would be the descendant of David whom God had promised would sit always on David’s throne.

He is talked about quite a bit in the Old Testament, so just one or two references to give you a sense of their expectation

Firstly, God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7.

2 Sam. 7: “The LORD declares to you: The LORD himself will make a house for you. ¹² When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a rod of men and blows from mortals. ¹⁵ But my faithful love will never leave him as it did when I removed it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever.”

And this expectation is developed in the prophets

For example

*Isaiah 9: ⁶ For a child will be born for us,
a son will be given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ The dominion will be vast,
and its prosperity will never end.
He will reign on the throne of David
and over his kingdom,
to establish and sustain it
with justice and righteousness from now on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of Armies will accomplish this.*

Or

*Jeremiah 23: ⁵ “Look, the days are coming”—this is the LORD’s declaration—
“when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David.
He will reign wisely as king
and administer justice and righteousness in the land.*

And there are other references in the outline

In confessing Jesus to be the Christ Peter is saying Jesus is

Not the forerunner but the one who is to come

He is the One who is God's King – the one who would establish an eternal reign – one death would not end; one who would rule over all, so Israel need never fear their enemies, never be oppressed again; the one who would reign with justice and righteousness – and so their lives would be ordered, know prosperity and peace

Jesus is the one through whom God will fulfill all His promises to His people, bringing that end time renewal of Israel, resurrection and gift of the Spirit

The one who can, as Jesus did, preach the Kingdom, the reign, of God, because He brings it in Himself

Jesus is the promised Christ through whom God achieves His saving purposes in the world,

It is a big call – especially as Jesus had none of the trappings of a king – no army, no treasury, no palace

But in this confession, in seeing Jesus clearly as He is, they are blessed – that is what Jesus says in Matthew

Matthew 16: 17 Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Blessed, even if they Don't get it all, don't understand Jesus' work, how He will be King, clearly yet – as next week's passage, and the whole struggles of the disciples to understand and accept Jesus' teaching about having to go to the cross, makes plain

The Value of Clear Sight - Why Blessed?

But why are the disciples blessed in confessing Jesus as the Christ, in seeing Jesus clearly? Why are we?

Firstly, it is true. It is the only confession of Jesus' identity consistent with what they have seen and heard of Jesus.

They have seen Jesus has the authority of the One who is stronger than all that enslaves us and brings disorder into our lives - a terrifying and powerful nature, the forces of evil, sickness and death, the one who can provide abundantly for all, the one who can forgive sins.

It is true, and it is always better to live informed by truth than lies, to walk in light and not in darkness

Secondly, it clarifies their relationship with Him, and it makes it possible for them to trust Him as He deserves and respond to Him as He commands. We will hear next week what Jesus expects of those who will be His followers.

But as the Christ He is the one who can deliver His people, bring them to share in the life of the new age. He should be listened to and believed, followed even as He claims things no religious teacher or even a prophet, can or should – like giving eternal life or a place in God's Kingdom – for they are in His gift.

Thirdly, this confession gives the disciples a foundation upon which their understanding of Jesus' work can grow.

As I have said, they didn't get it all straight away. They found what Jesus goes on to teach about His coming death in Jerusalem really hard.

The healing of the blind man is a parable not just of their movement to confess Jesus as the Christ, but also of what will happen in the second half of the gospel, their movement to understand what kind of Christ He will be, the work He has come to do – to understand just how great He is. An understanding Jesus Himself will give them in His teaching and appearing to them after He has risen.

But in confessing Jesus as the Christ they now have a framework, the framework of the Old Testament and its promises, by which to engage with all Jesus does and listen to all His teaching, one that will help them in the end understand the cross that they find unthinkable now.

They will be able to understand it as the will of God, the victorious work of God's Christ to bring peace to His people

The peace that can only come when sin is atoned for, death defeated, the evil's ones reign of lies broken

And not just for the Jewish people, the chosen people, but for all peoples

Confessing Jesus now as the Christ, seeing Him clearly, is a God given blessing for the disciples

And when Jesus comes clearly into focus for us as the Christ we also are blessed, for the same reasons.

Firstly, It is true – Acts 2:³⁶ *“Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

As Peter proclaims at Pentecost the resurrection shows beyond doubt that the Lord Jesus is God’s Christ, the promised descendant of David, the one who has an eternal kingdom, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth is given.

It is always a blessing to know the truth, to know, as Peter proclaims to Cornelius

Acts 10:⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.”

That the Lord Jesus is the judge who each one of us must meet, the one who will give the final verdict on our lives

Good to know that – gives your life a different shape, a different trajectory if you if you think you will face a living, just judge, and not just die and rot

And it is good to know, as you think of that judgement, that Jesus the Christ, the judge, has authority to forgive your sins and will if you repent and believe

It is a blessing to have your eyes opened to see Jesus is the Christ for it is true

And to see Jesus clearly in confessing Him Christ clarifies our relationship with Him. He is the one whose word rules, the One who can supply superabundantly for us,

So We should do what He teaches and should trust that what He promises will be delivered. Some thing He calls us to do may be difficult

Whether that is telling the truth, being faithful in marriage, loving our enemies, forgiving those who wrong us, being sexually selfcontrolled so that we live chaste lives, but knowing He is the Christ, we know He should be trusted and obeyed

And seeing who Jesus is is a blessing because it gives us a foundation on which to build a growing understanding of the greatness of Jesus and His work, which a fuzzy, indistinct, blurred picture of Jesus does not do.

Like the disciples, we don’t get it all at once.

There is much to puzzle over in the death of Jesus, the death that saves us, the death that gives us the shape of the Christian life.

But knowing it is the death of the Christ opens the door for us to be taught from God’s word about its meaning

To learn more of God whose will it is, and of ourselves and our need, of the depth of His love and grace, of the completeness of His victory there that saves us

Thinking Jesus is just another prophet or teacher or life advisor or a failed social revolutionary – will deny that growth in understanding

It is a great blessing to see Jesus clearly, to confess Him as the Christ

Look Again

The blind and the blurry are always at a disadvantage in the world of light

It is good to see things clearly,

so if you are not getting Jesus, look again

If you are dismissing Jesus

Ask yourself - What pre-commitments are making it hard for you to engage with the evidence? Is your trust in yourself and your own judgment justified?

Can you really make your own tradition, reason or experience the judge of what God can or cannot do

Recognize what is holding you back – and look again

Not at what you demand to see, but what is there to see

And if you need help with that second look, want to look at the gospel evidence with someone who sees things differently from you, come and talk

And if you feel positively towards Jesus, think there is something there but you never seem to have been able to really commit, never quite got what is so good about Jesus

Ask - What pre-occupations mean you are failing to engage with Jesus

Your work, your sport, anxiety about your study

Preoccupations that mean you were never really listening to what Jesus is saying, only listening for the things that concern you

And so never really got His greatness – of His love, or His power, the greatness of the gift of life He came to give you

Listen again as Jesus talks, not of how you can make your life a success, but of sin and judgement, of forgiveness and life, of love and truth

And see His greatness

And if you are someone who by God's grace sees clearly, confesses that He is the Christ

Give thanks – you are blessed

And having been given sight, keep looking to Him – for the way of life, for the compassionate provision of all we need, for the fulfilment of all He has promised us

And recognise a clear picture of Jesus is not there to be kept to yourself

The Christ is the ruler of all

The judge of all

The one who can forgive and give life to all who come to Him,

He is to be shared with all