

## MARK 6-8 – COMMENTARY NOTES

Our reading builds up to chapter 8, where the gospel takes a different turn. Up to this point many themes already familiar from the beginning of the gospel are taken up and intensified.

- 1) Jesus' exorcisms and healings continue to take place. (6:53-56, 7:24-37)
- 2) Jesus continues to exercise authority even over natural phenomena, such as walking on water (6:45-52) and increasing a small amount of food enough for large crowds. (6:30-44, 8:1-21)
- 3) Jesus continues to have conflicts with Pharisees and Scribes, challenging their understanding of God's will as reflected in the law, offering his alternative understanding. (7:1-23)
- 4) The theme of sowing continues as the disciples are sent out in twos to sow the seed with words and healing actions following the example of Jesus. (6:7-13)
- 5) The importance of faith and its persistence as a basis for receiving Jesus and experiencing his miraculous power, also continues to be central. (7:24-30) Where there is no faith, Jesus cannot accomplish his work (6:1-6)
- 6) Various responses to Jesus continue to be evidenced. They include resistance by some people (6:1-6) and the religious leaders (7:1-23), and openness to Jesus in awesome expressions of faith and related experiences of healing. (7:24-30, 6:53-56)
- 7) The disciples, who have been privileged to receive Jesus' fullest teaching and witness Jesus' power and authority more than anyone, seem to be supportive, and they do have some success (6:7-13), yet they fail to really see, understand, and believe. In several places Jesus interprets their lack of faith as a 'hardness of heart', which is to say, an inner resistance to fully trust Jesus and surrender themselves totally to following him. Hardness can be hate, resentment, bitterness, cynicism and despair too. It is a shutting down of openness of feeling at the heart level.

8: 22-26 – Jesus' cure of a blind man immediately precedes a key section of the gospel and a turning-point in the narrative. The fact that the healing takes place in two stages is a sign that it is meant to interpret why it is that even the people who are around Jesus are not prepared to really follow Jesus.

After an initial attempt to heal the man, Jesus asks him whether he can see anything. The man can see, but his sight is blurry and distorted. It takes a second try along with the man's more intense effort to see, to get his sight fully. What does this mean? Jesus distinguishes those who fail to see altogether because they are resistant (e.g. Pharisees, Scribes and some people), from those who do see and recognize Jesus for who he is, but do not fully trust him and surrender to him beyond any pre-existing expectations or presuppositions about messiahship. They want the blessing of Jesus without the cost of following Jesus. Even though Jesus has not yet spelled out the cost,

he can see by such failure to trust him fully, that there will be resistance to the way of the cross. It will take the resurrection before the disciples truly see Jesus for who he is. This also means that seeing and following go together. In following and bearing the cost for such following, sight is restored, and faith is confirmed and strengthened.

8: 27-9:1 - First there is a public confession of Jesus as the messiah-Christ (27-30), followed by Jesus' teaching about the path of the Christ (31-33), followed by teaching about the path of the true Christian (34-9:1).

This passage (and the two chapters that follow) forms the bridge between Jesus public ministry in Galilee and his private journey to Jerusalem, which will culminate in his arrest and crucifixion. Now Jesus will turn his focus from the disciples as co-labourers to the disciples as Jesus' labour. Now he will no longer teach by using mighty acts of compassionate healing, but rather, by teaching about the cost of compassion.

What does it mean to be a co-labourer of Jesus? Are we prepared to give up and let go so much that the world around us considers valuable and desirable? What demands will compassion make on our time, our money, our emotional investment, our preoccupations, and priorities? What strain will befall some of our relationships? In what ways will we be stretched spiritually and practically? Where is truthfulness, a commitment to justice, and challenging engagements with those close to us part of the cost/commitment to divine compassion as our way?

There are different responses people make to the call and demand to shape life according to compassion. There are those, like the Pharisees, Scribes, and some people, who will respond with resistance, criticism, cynicism or, in our times, plain indifference. They will mistrust our motives, criticize our foolishness, and mistake our commitments as fanaticism or misplaced needs to receive approval or avoid condemnation. Then there are those who will respond positively to what we do, but admire us from afar, unprepared to surrender themselves to the same ministry and way of life. Unless there is some inner conversion, there remains a gulf between those who are happy to receive and to admire, from those who become givers and co-labourers with Christ in sowing the seeds of the divine kingdom (compassion breeding generosity, openness, forgiveness and authentic relationships). Finally, there are those few who are moved and changed within, who are compelled to follow Jesus, deny themselves (the world's standards and goals of privilege) and take up their cross (the rejection, resistance, indifference, and distant though non-committal admiration) in their following.

And there is both a warning and a promise. The warning is that holding on to one's life, one's false life as the world has defined it, one's apparent security, privilege, and attachments to things, will lead to a losing of true life. The promise is that we will receive so much more than we will ever be called to give up. Forfeiting the world's form of pleasures, materialism, security, and status-hunger, is not a greater price to pay than

one's true life, a fullness that comes from serving the demands of love, finding the purpose for which we have come into being. Do we want a true or a false fulfilment? The problem is that true fulfilment is veiled under the cover of sacrifice, risk, and tears in the service of others in Christ's name. But those who pass through such crosses know that the only and true resurrection comes on the other side of the cross, not by means of avoidance and rejection of it.