

An unusual time! (Mark 8: 22-38)

We've had to get used to things being unusual in the past twelve months so let's look back to some unusual things in our Lord's ministry.

1. An unusual miracle! (v 22-26)

This is one of the few passages in Mark which is not to be found in any other Gospel. Notice straightaway the concern that some folk had for the blind man as they brought his needs to Jesus, in fact they begged Him to help. What a wonderful example for us to constantly be bringing the needs of others for prayer to the Lord Jesus. They obviously knew that He could help in a way that no one else could and so it is with us; He and He alone can meet the deepest and ultimate needs of any of us. And then we notice the sensitive way in which our Lord leads the man out of the village and then begins the healing process; nothing unusual in our Lord's gentle sensitivity and recognition of the needs of each individual person with whom He had dealings. It has been said that our Lord treated 52 different people in 52 different ways! What an example to us to try, with His help, to deal with a similar sensitivity and flexibility that He showed.

And then we come to something very unusual in the process of our Lord's healing because it appears to have been gradual. He could have achieved the healing instantaneously, and even at a distance as He often did, but this one takes time and indeed is done in two stages. That is an encouragement to us when there seems to be delay in any answer to our prayers. Sometimes that can be a very long delay, but it does not mean that the Lord has ignored what we have asked of Him! The time comes when this man, who was blind and then could half see, was able to see everything clearly and you might have expected him to be told to go off and tell everyone about this but not a bit of it. That is perhaps a clue to the fact that we are being told something deeper than we have seen so far, so we need to read on!

2. An unusual question. (v 27-30)

For anyone else to ask that question would seem egotistical in the extreme and yet the Lord Jesus is unique in pointing to Himself in a way that displays complete humility. Indeed the whole of Mark's Gospel, so far, has been proclaiming that He was entirely apart from anyone else. He was the healer of all kinds of sickness including leprosy. (This is worth particular notice because the rabbis regarded the prospect of somebody being cured from leprosy as as likely as somebody rising from the dead.) Sometimes He did it by a touch and sometimes by a word alone. He even controlled the very weather! – "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obeys Him?" (4:41)

And so Peter eliminates various alternative possibilities including John the Baptist who had seen very clearly that Jesus was so far apart and above him that he wasn't even worthy to untie His sandal. He constantly pointed to Jesus, so much so that he received the wonderful accolade after his death, "John did no miracle but every word he said about Jesus was true" (John 10:41). So having eliminated John and other possibilities it seems Peter suddenly has a "lightbulb" moment and says in as many words, "Of course you are the One we've all been waiting for, the Christ, the Messiah, the One that the Scriptures tell us about" and of course that changed everything, just as it has done for countless followers of Jesus since. Listen to the testimony of a pop singer from my childhood, Helen Shapiro, "I became a believer in Jesus and that's changed my life completely." So far so good but now we are in for a shock!

3. An unusual rebuke (8: 31-33)

We might notice that in verse 30 He has told them not to tell anyone about Him (a bit like our friend in verse 26) and this gives us a clue to what follows. Because all of a sudden our Lord begins to tell them that His pathway will not be one of earthly conquest but of suffering at the hands of the religious establishment leading to His death and we notice He made this crystal clear to them (verse 32). Small wonder that Peter was appalled and perhaps didn't really take in that our Lord had also said that this would not be the end, but He would rise again after three days. It is not surprising that Peter rebuked our Lord and for the best of reasons, you might think, was determined that He wouldn't go the way of the cross. How astonishing then that our Lord's rebuke to Peter is so emphatic and public. Peter, without realising it, is taking the side of Satan to divert Jesus from going to the cross to die for us.

Peter had yet to see that this dreadful happening would also be the most wonderful, just like the blind man halfway through the miracle, his eyes were half opened. Like the blind man he needed a second touch. How many of us can testify down the ages that the way in which the Lord has opened our eyes has been gradual and hesitant, often with resistance until finally we are able to say, "Once I was blind but now I see". It may be that some of us would honestly acknowledge that our eyes are half opened but that we have yet to understand more and in particular why Jesus went to the cross. If that is the case can I gently suggest getting down on our knees and giving thanks to the Lord Jesus for dying on the cross in my place and in yours and asking Him into your life in a newer and deeper way than ever before. But before we leave this passage, we come to something else....

4. An unusual challenge (v 34-38)

What follows is of particular interest and importance for us because we notice that now the Lord is speaking not just to his disciples but to the crowd (v 34) and by extension that includes you and me. He challenges us to commit ourselves to wholeheartedly following him as the One who went to the cross for us and rose again as He said He would. He tells us that there is nothing more important than following Him, in fact nothing comes remotely close. He challenges you and me, are we going to fall for the lure of this passing generation and its blandishments and end up empty handed? You would think that we learnt enough in the last year of the futility in placing our trust in such passing paraphernalia. The alternative is to put Jesus first and not to be ashamed of Him nor His Gospel nor His words and notice that those three (Jesus, the Gospel and His words) cannot be separated from one another.

Indeed He said, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away." (Matthew 24 v35). Remember that our Lord Jesus resisted all temptation to avoid the cross time and time again but thank God that His death on the cross was sealed by His resurrection so that we can know that everything He said is true and everything yet to happen will be accomplished. One day He will be returning, and He loves us too much not to warn us to get ready now for that day, whenever it may be. So why don't we just do that without delay?

A prayer you may like to pray to conclude,

"Lord Jesus, thank you for this unusual miracle, thank you for opening Peter's eyes to see the answer to your unusual question, Who am I? Thank you for the unusual rebuke as you began to open his eyes to the need for you to go to the cross. Please open our eyes as you did to the blind man in your unusual miracle and as you did to Peter and help us to face the unusual, but crucial, challenge to follow you so that when we face you, you need not be ashamed of us and we need not be ashamed of ourselves in your presence." Amen