

# Magarey Lectures 2016

## Bible Studies by Greg Elsdon

### Jesus and his Disciples at Cross Purposes

#### STUDY ONE: A journey from blindness to sight

##### An overview of Mark 8:22-10:52



The central section of Mark's Gospel (8:22-10:52) offers a splendid example of the way Mark shapes his telling of the story of Jesus in order to address the needs of his own day. This carefully constructed narrative relates the story of Jesus and his disciples travelling from Galilee up to Jerusalem.

We join Mark's story with Jesus responding compassionately to a blind man who had been brought to him to be healed (8:22-26).

8:22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" 24 And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." 25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

At face value this story seems to present us with a dilemma. Jesus, the miracle-working Messiah, is having an 'off-day'. After being touched by the healing hands of Jesus the man sees again, but with no clarity or perception. Mark is not at all troubled by this. His interest in this story is not what actually happened and why Jesus failed to heal this blind man at his first attempt. He is concerned primarily to illustrate the disciples' journey from blindness to sight. In the previous story Jesus rebuked the disciples for their hardness of heart and their lack of perception – **"Do you have eyes, and fail to see?" (8:18)**. From the blind man at Bethsaida the reader learns that curing the blindness of the disciples will be no easy task!

"Sight now emerges as a central metaphor for faith in Mark. The man's partial restoration (symbolizing the confused state of the disciples) requires a second touch by Jesus (8:24f). This two-stage healing suggests that the reader must now grapple with the second part of Mark's story in order to "see things clearly." (Ched Myers,)

Until this point in Mark's narrative the disciples have not been challenged directly about who they think Jesus really is. Even the stilling of the storm resulted only in the question - **"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41)**. But here in 8:27ff Jesus asks his followers directly and unambiguously, **"Who do people say that I am?"** They had listened to his teaching and observed his way of life. Now it was time for them to declare openly their own opinion. "Who do you think you are following?", Jesus asks his disciples. In response the disciples are prepared to offer everyone's ideas but their own. Like the blind man in the previous story they see, but not clearly. They are beginning to get the picture, but their vision remains blurred.

Jesus then asks them more directly, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah." At this point we would expect to hear some expression of congratulation to Peter - maybe even the trumpeting of heavenly affirmation! But what appears at first glance to be clarity of vision on Peter's part is soon exposed as partial and misleading. Just like the earlier responses of 'John the Baptist', 'Elijah' and 'one of the prophets', Peter's orthodox sounding confession is deemed to be short of the mark. In fact, Jesus' only response to this impressive sounding statement from Peter was a stern charge (the very same word Mark employs to describe Jesus' rebuke of evil spirits in 1:25, 3:12 and 9:25) ordering them (Peter and his colleagues) to keep quiet and not say anything to anyone about what Peter had just said.

Following his silencing of the disciples Jesus begins, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, to talk clearly about who he understands himself to be and what he considers to be his mission. Rejecting elevated titles and the quest for power, Jesus talks of himself as the suffering Son of Man and informs the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be killed by Israel's religious leaders (8:31). Peter responds by rebuking Jesus. He did not want to hear any more of this weak and dangerous talk. Having been silenced by Jesus following his 'confession', Peter now seeks to silence Jesus as he begins to speak openly about who he is, and what he is on about. Then the tables turn again and it's Jesus' turn to once again rebuke Peter.

Peter's high sounding confession and adamant attempt to protect Jesus from himself are exposed as obstructionist to Jesus' cause. They have their origin not in divine insight, but in the limited perspective of human beings. "Get behind me", says Jesus to Peter. 'Don't go running off ahead of me - doing things your own way - get behind me, where good disciples (followers!) should be, and stop being a Satan - a stumbling stone for others to trip over.'

Jesus then gathers people together and teaches them about what it means to be involved with him in the Kingdom of God. 'If you really want to follow me you will have to put your own plans and aspirations on hold and take up my agenda - an agenda that will inevitably be costly', says Jesus. Attempts to save oneself are ultimately self-defeating. We might succeed in gaining the outward trappings - but in the process lose ourselves. The self-denial of Christian discipleship is not personal asceticism - but a preparedness to have our values and practice shaped by Jesus' vision of life lived in the service of God's agenda.

It is not difficult to discern a very deliberate and powerful pattern beginning to emerge in this section of Mark's Gospel. Jesus **reveals** something about his identity and destiny; the disciples **misunderstand** and resist him; and then Jesus **instructs** his disciples in the ways of God's Kingdom. This three-fold pattern of '**revelation - misunderstanding - instruction**' is repeated twice more in this 'central section' of Mark. In 9:31 Jesus again informs his disciples that he is going to be handed over to his enemies and that he will be killed. Again they fail to grasp what he is telling them. While Jesus wants to talk with them about his impending suffering, they get involved in an argument among themselves about who is the greatest! Jesus responds by using a little child to expose the inappropriateness of their power mongering.

“For Jesus, the Kingdom of God belongs especially to the poor, the powerless, the outcasts, the dispossessed, those who have no standing within the community. Those who count for nothing in the eyes of men are the very ones to whom the Kingdom of God is promised, for they come empty handed, with no power or position of their own, their only hope is in God.” **(Athol Gill)**

Later Mark (10:33-34) describes a third occasion on which Jesus confronts his followers with the news of what awaits him in Jerusalem. Yet again the disciples fail to comprehend. James and John, two of the ‘inner cabinet’ of the disciples, go to Jesus with a request for positions of power and authority. And again Jesus takes this as an opportunity to teach them more about the nature of life in the Reign of God.

“The way of the power of the Kingdom is the way of service. The places of honour are those at the right and left hand side of the crucified Lord.” **(Hans Ruedi-Weber)**

Mark 8:31	Mark 9:31	Mark 10:33-34
31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.	31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."	33 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."
Mark 8:32-33	Mark 9:33-37	Mark 10:35-45
Peter rebukes Jesus	Who is the greatest?	Give us power!

Despite Jesus’ repeated and unambiguous instructions to his disciples about what awaited him in Jerusalem, they continue to resist what he has to say and demonstrate that they are determined to impose their own needs and expectations upon Jesus.

This whole section of Mark’s narrative has been held together by the motif of a ‘journey’. What reads as a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is, more profoundly, a journey from **blindness to sight**. Jesus and his disciples are on the way!

Mk 8:27	Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and <b>on the way</b> he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"
Mk 9:33	Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about <b>on the way</b> ?"
Mk 9:34	But they were silent, for <b>on the way</b> they had argued with one another who was the greatest.
Mk 10:17	As he was setting out <b>on his journey</b> a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
Mk 10:32	They were <b>on the road</b> going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,

Mk 10:52	Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him <b>on the way</b> .
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As Jesus and his entourage leave Jericho, the last stop before Jerusalem, they encounter a blind beggar named Bartimaeus sitting 'beside the way' (10:46-52). Hearing the blind man's cry for mercy, Jesus asks the man "What do you want me to do for you?", and he replies, "My teacher, let me see again." With no further ado Jesus commands Bartimaeus to "Go!", informing him that his faith had saved him. Mark concludes this story, and this central section of the Gospel, with the note that the blind beggar immediately received his sight and followed him **on the way**.

10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." 52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The disciples' journey to Jerusalem was more than a geographical journey. They were on a journey of discovery about the identity of Jesus and the nature of life in God's Kingdom. Although they could see that Jesus was someone of significance with something important to say, they were unable, or unwilling, to see clearly what Jesus was revealing to them. **As Christian readers of these ancient stories we are challenged to make our own responses to this revelation of the identity and mission of Jesus. Having seen what we have seen, how will we live our lives?**

"It is difficult to open the eyes of the blind (Mark 8:22-26), but once the grace and power of God have permeated the deepest recesses of our being, we cannot but joyfully follow him on the way to Jerusalem, even though we know that it is the way of rejection and suffering, of death and resurrection (10:46-52). Discipleship is costly grace. It is grace, but it is costly for it leads to Jerusalem. It is costly, but it is grace for it is the result of the continuing work of God in our lives." (Athol Gill)

### the dirty dozen ?

