

## **St John's Keswick**

**Mark 6:30 – 34 & 53 – 56, July 2015.**

Good morning everyone...

My name is Mark Greene... whenever I meet a new group of people I do like to tell them that I used to work in advertising – I find it builds a bond of trust very quickly... Actually I spent ten years in advertising and eleven years in a theological college... to balance it out... and now I work for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.

I am very grateful to the community here at St Johns here for your welcome – to us all – and for the opportunity to worship with you.

We are going to focus on the reading from Mark and connect it to Jeremiah's prophecy which criticises the bad shepherds of his generation and promises that one day God will raise up good shepherds and a coming saviour King. And I want to pick out three themes from Mark. The shepherd's' proactive compassion, the shepherd's liberating teaching and the shepherd's transformational power...

Still, as you listened to the Gospel, perhaps it raised some questions in your mind: Does God heal today? And who do I know in need of healing? And what issues am I facing that perhaps leave me feeling confused, vulnerable, anxious... in need of a shepherd?

This chapter began with Jesus sending the twelve apostles to preach that the Kingdom of God is near and to cast out demons and heal and now they're back...

Successful but tired.

They report on what they have said and what they have done... on their words and their works.

This is precisely the same pattern that we have seen in Jesus' ministry all through Mark's Gospel – words and works, teaching and exorcising and healing. It's summarised in chapter 1 and chapter 3. Along the way we see individual incidents of healing and hear individual snippets of teaching... but the basic pattern remains

... and we see it here – he’s teaching in verse 34 and then in 56 exorcising and healing.

But the startling point is this: the twelve apostles are able to do the same things as Jesus: to teach and exorcise and heal in Jesus’ name. Here is not only teaching but miracle-working power that does not require the physical presence of Jesus to be effective... as is the case today.

But the apostles are tired... There are so many people buzzing around them that they can’t even eat... Like a rock band trying to get to their hotel after a gig or the royal family on tour, they can’t get a moment’s peace.

Jesus doesn’t just say “oh dear, what are we to do”, or try to shoo people away, his compassion for his team is proactive... and decisive. He takes the initiative. Lets go to a solitary place.

The shepherd shows proactive compassion for his people.

But when they arrive at the retreat centre, the crowd has got there first...

How would you feel?

You’ve come away to a quiet place in the Lake District, just you and a few friends to relax and reflect and refresh and then a couple you meet in the tent in the first evening tell you about a really knotty situation in their lives... No, no... We’ve come away to rest...

Now Jesus doesn’t always respond to people’s needs as they might want or when they might want... he doesn’t heal every one...

But on this occasion, he does respond to the crowd, “Because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

In other words he responds to them out of compassion.

Here the problems the people have are not primarily physical.

To be a sheep without a shepherd means you are likely to lack direction, you are likely to be lost, to be bewildered, to be anxious, to be vulnerable to predators –

marauding wolves, mountain lions – vulnerable to bad shepherds, to anyone who seems to be able to offer some direction... In Matthew's account he calls the people "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd."

And what is Jesus response?

His response is to be the shepherd they need.

For he is the true shepherd.

In Jeremiah 23 we heard how God criticised the leaders of Israel for being bad shepherds, for failing to care for the people. In response God promised that he would raise up good shepherds and a righteous king who would be their saviour...

Here in Mark, Jesus is fulfilling that prophecy, acting as the good shepherd and the righteous saviour that we know from John's gospel he understood himself to be:

"I am **the good shepherd**. **The good shepherd** lays down his life for **the sheep**."

Why do the people need a shepherd?

If you look at the context in Jeremiah you will see that King Jehoiakin is idolatrous, and the prophets and priests self-deluded and godless. Sadly, as often is the case in every sphere of life, poor leaders gripped by false ideas usually have a terrible impact on their people. Imagine what it is like to be lead by the extremist militant leaders of Isis, recall the damage done by Nazism, or PolPot communism... or the racism of apartheid South Africa or ponder the impact of the consumerism and practical atheism of Western European culture on our nations.

Ideas have legs. They take you somewhere.

And what of Britain today? Certainly, all the data suggests that millions of us are harassed and helpless...

Physically, our children are the first generation who have a lower life expectancy than their parents... and our adults are increasingly nipped, tucked, botoxed,

silicon-filled, overweight, gastric-belted, fake-tanned, over-alcoholised and drugged...

Emotionally, we have a huge incidence of family breakdown... We have epidemic levels of depression and increasing levels of mental illness that our government is incomprehensibly indifferent to... we have fewer friends and spend less time with people who are important to us than we ever did...

Psychologically, we are convinced that image is more important than character, style more significant than substance...

Intellectually, we are enslaved to the credo that tolerance matters more than truth, and hypersensitive to the slightest politically incorrect verbal error whilst hugely tolerant of the prurient, promiscuous life styles of the rich and famous... Levels of trust at every level of society have rarely been lower... virtually all our major institutions have come under intense scrutiny in the last five years for significant moral failings – the BBC, NewsCorp, Parliamentary Expenses, the Merchant Banks... And apart from, do we have any big compelling vision as a nation to give us any sense of destiny, identity and purpose?

Our nation needs words of liberating truth...

I suspect that we often associate compassionate response with **acts** of kindness. But a compassionate response to someone who believes that there is no God and that they are merely a cluster of amino acids among 7 billion clusters of amino acids and that therefore their life, anyone's life is of no significance... a compassionate response to a nihilist is to seek to communicate that there is a loving God and a purpose to the life we have been given.

A compassionate response to someone who is still angry and embittered because of something their brother did to them ten years ago is not just to offer them a cup of Earl Grey and a Kendal mint cake but to help them find a way to forgive him.

Truth liberates.

Yes, people suffer from physical and mental sickness but people also suffer from sick ideas, people are also enslaved by ideas that poison their imagination, corrode

their souls, destroy their relationships... and trap them in attitudes and behaviours that leave them empty and bitter.

Ideas after all have legs. They take you somewhere. Our beliefs and values shape our behaviour.

Many Jews in Jesus' time had been told by their shepherds, the Pharisees and scribes, that they could earn their salvation by doing the right things, by trying to keep every jot and tittle of the law... a hopeless task consigning people to a never-ending treadmill of effort and failure, of guilt and shame..... of ever-more obsessive ruminating on the tiniest of details... the tithing of minute quantities of herbs like mint and rue... not doing great good for fear of breaking some minor man-made stipulation... joyless legalism...

In contemporary Britain we have our own versions of a Pharisaic salvation by works... Take one example. Education. How we have foisted on our children an endless round of exams, and performance measures... how we have foisted on them a relentless childhood long anxiety... Your future depends on good SAT's and 7A\* s at GCSE and 4As at As level and 3 As a t A level and a 2:1 at university...How easy for them to believe that their significance depends on their success, on their works... The same ideology pervades our workplaces. Good works lead to significance. Success leads to significance. This is the precise opposite of the Gospel of grace by faith alone.

Indeed, if you know that you are already significant because you were thought of before the foundation of the earth, created in the image of a God who so loved you that he sent his son to die for you, well, you are likely to be emotionally more secure and much more likely to succeed... because emotionally secure people are more likely to take healthy risks and more likely to bounce back well from failure.

Our needy nation desperately needs the liberating teaching of the good shepherd.

So we've seen the proactive compassion of the good shepherd for the physical needs of his team, and we have seen that same proactive compassion expressing itself in liberating teaching for the emotional, psychological, credal needs of the crowd... and in the section we skipped over we see the good shepherd's proactive compassion for their physical need to eat... feeding 5000 of them...

And as we pick up our reading in verse 53 we see Jesus' transformational power to heal in extraordinary ways...

Now, we've seen miracles in the Bible before... there's creation, there are barren, older women giving birth, there's God's miraculous intervention to save his people through the plagues, there's the parting of the Red Sea, the daily miracle of manna in the desert, the drying up of the Jordan, there's Elijah's prayer to stop the rain for three years, the raising of the widow's son from the dead, there's Elisha's many miracles, there are miraculous interventions on behalf of many a king, there are prophetic words spoken that predict the future and come true... but here is something different... here's a group of people doing miracles, not just one person but twelve... And here in the accounts of Jesus' life miracles abound... it's not just the individual incidents that we have described for us... Simon's mother-in-law's fever dealt with, a leper cleansed, a paralysed man walking, a man with a shrivelled hand healed, Jairus' dead daughter alive... it's the pattern of his ministry... Jesus is teaching and Jesus is healing lots and lots and lots of people... here in Gennesaret on the western edge of Lake Galilee, just as he did in Bethsaida on the Northern edge... just as he has done all over Galilee.

Now these miracles are not just marvellous acts of compassion and grace... they are in the NT described as signs... They point to something else.

This word for sign is also used in the Old Testament to refer to acts of God on behalf of his people. So, Jesus' miracles are to be understood as acts of God on behalf of his people, signs that God's saving rule was beginning to dawn.

In sum, in *works* as well as *words*, Jesus was proclaiming the arrival of God's reign, announcing *and* demonstrating the presence and power of the kingdom.

In the section that is sandwiched between our two little sections, the implications of the kingdom are extended even further. Jesus walking on stormy water, Jesus calming the storm and Jesus feeding 5000 people – these are miracles that the disciples cannot do on their own.

And these are miracles that demonstrate Jesus' power not just over the human body and mind... but also over the whole created order.

Those creation miracles are a sign of God's purposes for the whole created order, glimpses of a renewed cosmos, when sickness and pain will be no more, when God's creation will be restored to its original harmony.

So Jesus has been announcing the dawn of a new era in Israelite, and indeed world, history and he has been doing miracles with a frequency and a supernatural power that indicates that new era has indeed begun. Jesus' works match his words: The King is here, shepherding his people in body and mind and heart and soul.

So, in this passage we see a Jesus of proactive compassion... he is the same today as he was yesterday and will be tomorrow...

We see a Jesus of transformational power... he defeats the works of Satan and heals the sick and raises the dead... he is the same today and as he was then and will be tomorrow...

And he heals today... I have seen it in my own life, and seen him heal others too many times to doubt that he can... And I also know that he does not always heal ... but he always cares...

We see Jesus bringing liberating truth... a true account of reality, a true account of who God is, a true account of who we are and of what we can become, a true and reliable offer of hope and purpose...

We here today know more about who Jesus is than the harassed and helpless sheep of 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilee or the sick and demonised people of 1st century Gennesaret... but still they do have something to teach us... they knew where to look for proactive compassion and liberating truth and transformational power ...

They hurried to the good shepherd, he who would show them and us the depth of his proactive compassion not only through his liberating truth-telling and transforming acts of power but by laying down his life on the cross that any who received him might have life abundant and eternal.

Let us hurry to him always. Let us bring ourselves to him now.

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