

Seeing Jesus clearly

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to spend probably the next two or three months looking through this second half of Mark, the kind of last eight chapters. This is the point that we got up to, yeah, the end of 2018, so we're picking up from there.

For those of you who weren't at the church this time last year, or the unlikely, I suppose, scenario that you were here, but you don't remember every single word that I said, I thought it would be good to give a bit of a story so far for Mark's gospel.

Right back at the start of looking through Mark, our very first week as a church, we kind of flagged up three questions, big questions, really questions that whatever you believe, whatever your starting point, whether you're a Christian or not, are questions that we owe it to ourselves, our friends owe it to themselves to face up to about Jesus.

There's this incredible quote by the historian H.G. Wells who said this, I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history.

Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history. That's amazing, isn't it, that even historically speaking, Jesus is huge, whatever you believe.

[1 : 2 1] And so what is it that we need to find out about him? What are these three questions? And I think they boil down really to this. Number one, who was Jesus?

Number two, what did he do? And number three, what does it mean to follow Jesus? How do we respond to him? And those are the questions that Mark's gospel helps us answer and has been dealing with so far, particularly that first one, who is Jesus?

In chapters 1 through to 8, Jesus arrives and demonstrates through his actions time and time again who he is. He calms a storm, he casts out demons, he heals the sick, he teaches with wisdom that kind of blows people's minds, he miraculously feeds 5,000 people and so much more.

And all of these are not just supposed to make people think, wow, that guy's cool, look at him. That they're actually like signposts pointing toward who Jesus is.

That actually he is the God of all creation. That actually he's the one who's come, that people have been waiting for, who is going to deal with evil.

[2 : 3 4] That he is the one who's coming, that he's going to put things right and bring in this long-awaited kingdom of God he speaks about. The kingdom of God, a world lived under God's perfect rule and authority.

A world where everything is as it should be, as it was designed to be. And it is Jesus who is going to bring in that kingdom. That's what these signs have been pointing towards.

And yet it seems through the first half of Mark that people are missing the point. I remember one time in Edinburgh seeing a girl on her phone standing at a pedestrian crossing and she pressed the button on the crossing and then started looking at her phone.

And the green man came up and yet she was still looking down at her phone. And then the green man started flashing. She was still looking at her phone. And then the green man went away, still looking at her phone.

And the red man came and she kind of looked up, saw the red man and looked slightly confused and disappointed as to why was this process taking so long for her to cross over the road.

[3 : 42] And that's almost what's been happening in Mark so far in terms of who Jesus is. People have been in the right place at the right time and all these signs have been there but they've not got it.

They've not seen it. And not even his disciples, not even his kind of closest friends and followers. If you've got those verses open just in front of you, you could look up to verse 21 of chapter 8, just before this section.

Jesus says to his disciples, Do you still not understand? And they don't. At least not yet. And that's what this next section of Mark, which we're going to look at, is going to deal with as they start to see things a little bit more clearly.

And in these verses, at the start of the second half of Mark's Gospel, we're going to see really clearly the answers to those three questions that we spoke about.

Who is Jesus? What did he do? And what does it mean to follow him? The disciples, as well as us, are going to get some real clarity on these things that we can't miss as they come straight from the mouth of Jesus.

[4 : 56] And so let's dig in to these verses now. First up, who is Jesus? Who do people say I am? Jesus asked his disciples in verse 27.

And they tell him that people have been saying all sorts of things. John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. So people have cottoned on to the fact that Jesus is someone pretty special.

He's not an ordinary guy. They've seen him. They've heard him. But who is he? John the Baptist and Elijah and the prophets. These people in the Bible all shared a similar role as being special people.

People who are kind of looked up to as God's people. But people who were there to kind of prepare and point their way forwards to the main event. To the real rescuer.

The real, the main event who is still to come. They were almost a bit like a trailer for a film in a way. If you ever go to the cinema with my dad and it's probably unlikely for most of you but he insists on getting there 20 minutes early before kind of the stated time.

[6 : 02] And everyone knows the film doesn't start for another half hour after that so it kind of takes all day but he always gets there early because he loves to watch the trailers for what is coming up. The films which are to come.

And so the cinema is kind of empty and the lights are on but you're watching an advert for some film that will be released in five years time or something. But he's always there. He loves it. He thinks they're great. Well before Jesus arrived there'd been these trailers.

There'd been these prophets pointing forward to a special one who was to come. They'd started a long time ago. Well who was Jesus when he arrives? Well people kind of lump him in with these other people.

People think he's another one of these trailers, these prophets. He's exciting. He's worth turning up early to watch. He has good stuff to say but actually not that he's the main event.

You know he was interesting but no more than that. And it's no different today is it? Who is Jesus? Who do people say he is?

[7 : 04] All sorts of things. He was a good guy. Maybe even he was a miracle worker. Perhaps he was someone who gave very good teaching, good advice, someone worth listening to.

But really it kind of grouped in with kind of Gandhi or Mother Teresa or Bilbo Baggins or you know all these kind of good people not unique, not the main event but maybe examples of how we could be nice to each other.

And yet Jesus gives a very different answer. Sorry, Peter gives a very different answer because Jesus goes on to ask it in verse 29 but who do you say that I am?

And here the question becomes personal and that is what's really important. because for us it's not what the media say about who Jesus was. It's not what your parents think.

It's not what I think. It's not what the person sitting next to you thinks. The biggest question is Jesus' question. Who do you say that I am? And here Peter speaks up and he hits the nail right on the head.

[8 : 06] You are the Christ, he says. Not one of many, not a trailer, the main event, the Christ. And what does that mean? We're kind of used to that, aren't we?

Jesus Christ, in our heads they go together naturally. Peter is the first person in the book of Mark to see that Jesus is the Christ, to use those words together.

Christ is not like Jesus' surname. It wasn't Mary and Joseph Christ and here's little Jesus Christ. It's a title. It's a description. It means the anointed one. It's the Greek translation of the word Messiah.

Peter. It's the one who's coming to rescue his person. It's the person that all of these prophets have been pointing to. That is what Jesus has been spelling out and this is a really significant moment in the book.

The first recognition of who Jesus is. Mark actually tells us that Jesus is the Christ in verse 1 of chapter 1. It takes until this point in chapter 8 until someone within the story recognizes his true identity.

[9 : 15] And so that's the answer to that first question. Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Christ, the rescuer, the center of God's plan. Any understanding of Jesus that other than that falls well short of the Christian message and what the Bible teaches which is that it's all about Jesus, that he is the main event.

And so there we go really. Verse 29, kind of the pinnacle of Mark so far, that right declaration of who Jesus is. You are the Christ.

And so I wonder if you notice something surprising. Why then straight away if you look down at verse 30, Jesus immediately orders them to tell no one about him.

That seems strange, doesn't it? Surely we expect Jesus to say yes, finally, eight chapters, but you've got it now. Now go and tell everyone. Is that not what we're about as a church?

To share Jesus. To tell people about Christ. And so why here does Jesus actually say the complete opposite of that? Well that leads us into that second question.

[10 : 21] What did Jesus do? And perhaps a better way to think about that question, we've seen that Jesus is the Christ. And now secondly, what does it mean to be the Christ?

And this is perhaps the main focus of the second half of Mark's gospel. What is Jesus Christ going to do? And interestingly, it's why it's introduced by this miracle that was at the beginning of the passage that Debbie read for us where Jesus heals the blind man.

Verses 22 down to 26. I wonder if that miracle felt slightly strange for you. I'm pretty sure it's a unique miracle in the whole of the Bible because it takes two stages.

It takes two attempts it seems for Jesus to get it right. He puts his hands on the man's eyes and the man can see, incredible, and yet people look like trees. And then Jesus puts his hands on the man's eyes again and this time he can see everything clearly, it says.

What on earth is going on here? Is Jesus tired? Has Jesus not had his breakfast? You know, Jesus has done all sorts of things before. He's healed people, he's fed thousands, he's walked on water.

[11 : 33] Surely he should heal this blind man just like that. Why does it take him two goes? Why are there two stages? Well, this miracle happens like this and it's put here by Mark in his record because this healing of the blind man is a physical picture of what is happening spiritually with the disciples.

At this point in the story the disciples are in this kind of middle stage. They're able to see, their eyes have been opened, they recognize Jesus is the Christ but they're not yet seeing clearly.

They're seeing people but they look like trees. They don't yet clearly see, really understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, what the Christ is going to do, how he's going to carry out that role.

You know, until they get that, well, they can't tell people about him. And so Jesus now is going to answer that question, what does it mean to be the Christ? He's going to truly open their eyes so they can see clearly.

Christ had been awaited, anticipated for a long time. A lot of people were expecting a great political leader who was going to restore the nation of Israel to its former glories. A lot of people were expecting a mighty warrior who would lead a rebellion against the Roman Empire and bring freedom.

[12 : 54] A lot of people were expecting that Christ to come and to win victory in some impressive way. But what does Jesus say? What is the first thing he tells his disciples once they've realized he's the Christ?

Verse 31, And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.

To be the Christ is going to mean rejection, it's going to mean suffering, it's going to mean death. That is how the Christ will win his victory.

That is how he is going to carry out this rescue. It is suffering now but with glory and resurrection to come. And nobody expected this.

Even the disciples, they knew Jesus was the Christ. This is not what they expected. How do we know that? Well because Peter takes Jesus aside and he rebukes him. He tells Jesus that this can't happen.

[14 : 01] It's a fairly confident thing to say to someone you've just claimed is the saviour of the world. But Peter is now saying actually no, no, no. That's not how a rescue works.

You need strength and power. This is going to be something impressive. But Peter is then rebuked by Jesus who says you don't have in mind the things of God but of man.

Peter, this rescue is not going to look like you expect or how the world expects. In fact, Jesus' rebuke is even more kind of stinging than that, isn't it?

Get behind me, Satan, he says. And we think, whoa, it's a bit strong, isn't it? It's a bit harsh. The point is this, that the message of Jesus' death is offensive, is hard.

We'd perhaps like it to be done some other way like Peter did. But Jesus says that to stand against that or in Peter's case to encourage him to avoid that is actually to side with Satan.

[14 : 59] that's how serious Jesus' mission is. There was nothing the devil would have wanted more than to stop Jesus going to the cross. And that is how vital, how central his death is.

I think if we're Christians, if we accept that Jesus is the Christ, the one who's come to save us, we can still so easily be like Peter, having in mind the things of man.

We want our Christianity to be impressive in a kind of earthly, worldly way. And we want to point to the great, helpful things that the church is doing. We kind of latch onto and point to famous or successful Christians.

Perhaps we even want to talk about how as a moral code it kind of underpins our Western society and it shows us how life works best. All of those things are great things. But actually, we need to remember that at the heart of Christianity, what it's really all about, what we ultimately need to share with people and what is the only thing that can save people is the gospel.

That gospel that can seem weak or foolish. That gospel that is that God came to earth as a man, that he suffered, that he died and that he rose again.

[16 : 13] As Christians, are we prepared to base our lives on that, to share that with others, to have that as our foundation? And that is what Jesus and the rest of the Bible shows is the pinnacle of his work.

If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, we're absolutely delighted that you're here. We hope that you will find that the church to be a welcoming place. We hope you'll make good friends and settle in. We hope as a church to try and serve our community and be a kind of a valued presence here.

But we also want to make sure that at the center of our message is Christ and Christ crucified. That is what we are holding out as hope. As a church, we are not going to fix the problems of this world or even this town or even the handful of people who come here.

But Christ has done that but only through the cross. Why is that? Why is it that suffering and death and resurrection is the only way for Jesus to carry out this rescue?

Why would he not let anything stand in his way as he went to the cross? Well, the reason is this, that Christ's rescue was much greater than anyone had predicted. It wasn't a rescue from Roman authorities.

[17 : 25] It's not a rescue from our low status or self-esteem. It's not simply something to get us out of a tricky situation, a crutch for when things are hard.

Jesus came as a rescue from death itself. The rest of Mark, the rest of the Bible makes it clear that this death is a result of sin. It's the Bible's word for the things that we've done wrong and that all of us have done that, that we've all turned away from God.

And that is why we all need this rescue. The good news of the Bible is that because of this rescue, because of what Jesus has done, that means that when we do die, that is not the end, but the beginning of an eternity spent with him because Jesus first has died but risen again, because Jesus has defeated death, because he has died in our place, the death that we deserve.

That is what it meant to be the Christ, to suffer in our place, but to rise again for our salvation. That can only happen through the cross.

And that is what the disciples needed to understand before they could tell other people about Jesus, before they could carry out that mission that Jesus would give them and that he does give us. That is what we need to remember when we tell other people about Jesus.

[18 : 42] He is the Christ, the rescuer, he is victorious, he is one, but that was done. The only way that could happen was through him dying on the cross.

Him dying the death that we deserve. It is an incredibly humbling message. It was his suffering for us and then glory to come. And that is how we are able to offer a message of hope, that is how we are able to be rescued, that is how we are able to become God's people as followers of Jesus because of what Jesus did on the cross.

And that then leads us on to our last question. If Jesus being the Christ meant suffering and then glory for him, what does it look like for us to follow the Christ, to follow Jesus?

And Jesus makes it really clear here, doesn't he, that as we follow him, the pattern for us is the same as the pattern for him. It is suffering and then glory. Let me read from verse 34.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.

[20 : 00] For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels.

Incredibly strong stuff that Jesus says. Look who he's talking to. He calls the crowds and his disciples and he says, if anyone would come after me. He's not talking about kind of really keen Christians.

He's not kind of selecting here some elite squad. This is Jesus' description of the ordinary Christian life. And that description is this, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

And being a Christian, to follow Christ, it means denying ourselves. It means that what I want, what would make my life easier, what I deserve even, is no longer kind of the defining motivation behind my life.

And that's very different from how the world works. It means putting ourselves out for other people in terms of our time, our energy, our possessions. Within the church, it means doing the jobs that people aren't keen on doing.

[21 : 18] It means moving from that kind of attitude of what would satisfy me, what would fulfill me, to actually, how can I best serve others? How can I use what God's given me for their good?

Ultimately, how can I best serve God? It's taking ourselves out of the center. Things no longer revolving around us, but having God there instead. So it's denying ourselves, it's moving ourselves out of the center.

But not only that, Jesus also calls us to take up our cross and follow him. And people would have known exactly what that phrase meant. It literally meant going to your death. That was the destination for one who'd taken up their cross.

It meant being prepared to give everything, even their lives, holding nothing back. And Jesus' point here is to say that there will be challenges that arise in the Christian life.

The Christian life is not a free pass to get us out of any difficulties. In fact, probably quite the opposite. There will be specific challenges that come because we are Christian. People don't always speak well of Christians, especially those who hold on to Jesus, his crucifixion, and resurrection as the center of their lives.

[22 : 33] Taking up our cross means being willing to identify with that. As Jesus says, not being ashamed of him or his words. It means being willing to stand up for a biblical stance on all sorts of things which might make us unpopular.

Jesus is really clear here, isn't he, that the Christian life is not a walk in the park. It's not, pray this prayer and all your problems will go away. He says, pray this prayer and then take up your cross and follow me.

And why does he say all this? It's Jesus trying to kind of put us off. Well, the point is here that he's being honest. He's being upfront and he is preparing people for what's to come.

And we spent some time in the holidays with Julie's parents. Julie's dad had just got a new app called AccuWeather from which he constantly told us to the nearest like half a percent, I think it was, the chance of rain within the next 30 minutes.

So if we're going to do anything, he said, well, there's like a 45.8% chance that we might get wet if we do that, which is fine. I've got the BBC app on my phone. Why is it that kind of as a nation we're obsessed with the weather?

[23 : 39] Why do we find it so interesting? Well, it's so that we can be prepared for what's coming, isn't it? You know, that sort of phrase that I heard a lot more since I moved to Scotland, there's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothing.

And I've gradually come to learn that the wrong clothing is anything that's not waterproof or thermal. But, you know, the point is, as if we're prepared, you know, we're able to deal with that.

And that's what Jesus is doing here. He's preparing us for what it looks like to follow the Christ. Preparing us for that cost. Preparing us that that involves suffering.

But also encouraging us that there is glory to come. That for those who do follow Jesus, despite what the world might throw at them, and they will have this ultimate joy and glory of being accepted by God when Jesus returns in glory with the holy angels as he will do.

Following Jesus means suffering now but glory to come, that it is hard. And we need to be honest with each other about that in the Christian life. It's hard, but it is worth it.

[24 : 48] And Jesus lays out the equation really simply, doesn't he? Verse 36, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? You know, we can try and get everything here and now we can keep ourselves at the center of our lives.

We can deny ourselves absolutely nothing and yet in the end that will cost us our entire soul, our eternal soul. A famous quote from the missionary Jim Elliott who said this, he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.

And he lived that out. He wasn't just words. He went to Ecuador to preach the gospel to tribes who've never heard of Jesus and those tribes killed him. And yet now as he enjoys that eternal life in glory, that life with God that he cannot lose, I'm 110% certain that he has no regrets about giving everything here on earth, even his very life for Jesus.

It is suffering now and glory to come. And the pattern for those who follow Jesus is the same as the pattern for Jesus. It is to make us aware, to make us realistic about what it's like to be a Christian but also it's an encouragement.

It's a boost to remind us what's in store. There is glory to come. The world might be hard but there is more than just this world. And that's why this passage finishes with what we call the transfiguration at the start of chapter 9.

[26 : 19] There are kind of books and PhDs and all sorts of stuff. You can read about this. You're welcome to go and find them. I'm going to do it in kind of eight lines so don't worry. Really above everything else, what is the transfiguration about?

It's here as an encouragement. It's here as a shot in the arm. It's here as a demonstration of the truth of this glory that's to come.

And Jesus in this kind of transfigured state is seen really in his true glory. And it's proclaimed and shown about him. He is the beloved son.

He is the one the whole Bible has been looking forward to. He is the Christ. And being the Christ means he'll suffer but there is glory to come. This transfiguration is kind of a glimpse of that.

Following that Christ means that we'll suffer. It means that we'll pay a cost. But for those who trust in Jesus there is this great glory to come that we will share in Christ's glory.

[27 : 23] That we will have a place in his perfect kingdom. That we will be there because of his perfect sacrifice. A sacrifice that we're not to be ashamed of not to shy away from but rather to accept and to follow and to share.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.