

The Jesus Identity

Studies in Mark's Gospel

Starter:

"The best teachers don't give their students the right answer' Discuss, with reference to Jesus' teaching of his disciples.

Before proceeding with this study, take a few moments to revise the previous events in Mark's account of Jesus.

Read Mark 8:1-10

Jesus has previously fed 5000 men (not to mention their women and children) in the desert (see Mark 6:33-44) . Now he feeds 4000 men in the wilderness. While there are many similarities between the two events, Mark records each for a slightly different purpose. The feeding of the 5000 is recorded in such a way so as to present Jesus as the "New Moses". Here the focus shifts to the crowd.

1. How long had the crowd been listening to Jesus teaching? What condition are they in?

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2. What is Jesus' motivation for feeding the crowd?

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3. Instead of just feeding the 4000 why do you think Jesus calls his disciples together first for a 'huddle' and discussion? From the few scant details describing the disciples response to this situation, does their apparently mute and passive response surprise you?

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Read Mark 8:11-13

Without further comment Mark moves forward in his narrative to describe a conflict with some Pharisees, presumably at Dalmanutha.

4. Even though Jesus has just fed 4000 men (among many other miracles), the Pharisees ask for 'a sign from heaven'. Jesus says that no such sign will be given. What do you think might be the difference between Jesus miracles and this newly requested "sign"?

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5. What do you think is the attitude of the Pharisees as they approach Jesus to demand a sign (v11)?

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A sign from heaven

When the Pharisees heard Jesus preaching the arrival of 'the Kingdom of God' (eg Mark 1:14-15) it is likely they understood him to refer the great Day of Judgement known as 'the Day of the Lord'. Perhaps on this basis they demand "signs from heaven" as described in Isaiah 13:6-10; Isaiah 34:1-4; Joel 2:10-11.

Do you think the Pharisees were right to ask for such "signs"?

Why/why not?

- 6. Describe a time when you have heard someone demand 'a sign' from God. In the bible the request for 'signs' from God is usually associated with a lack of faith or even hardened unbelief. For example, see Judges 6:36-40.

The problem with the Pharisees demand for a sign seems to be twofold: (i) they approach Jesus with a basic attitude of unbelief—they come to test him, to put him under *their* microscope, as it were; (ii) the signs they demand aim to negate the need for faith in coming to Jesus.

Read Mark 8:14-21

Jesus emphatic questioning of his disciples in verses 17-21 provokes them to consider carefully the question that has been brewing for some time now in Mark's gospel. The question is, 'Who is Jesus, *really*?' But before they arrive at their conclusion, Jesus warns them to beware the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod (v14-15).

- 7. What is the link between 'yeast' and 'bread' that might explain the disciples 'partial understanding' of Jesus line of questioning in these verses?
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- 8. From Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees in verses 11-13, and on earlier occasions in Mark's gospel, what actually is the 'yeast of the Pharisees'?
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- 9. What might be the 'yeast of Herod'? (see Mark 6:14-29, esp. v16)
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- 10. How can we avoid the errors of the Pharisees and Herod? What activities might help you in this process?
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Read Mark 8:22-26

- 11. Jesus has been concerned for the formation of his disciples faith and their clarity in understanding of who he is and what he is doing. How might this 'unusual' two-stage miracle be a parable of their situation?
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- 12. How do you know you have a clear-sighted and accurate faith in Jesus? How might this be strengthened?
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