

Service 14 September 2003
Mark 6:30-56

Title: Who is this man?

Before we start I would like to talk about arithmetic. Followers of *The Hitchhiker's Guide* may remember the discovery that sums done on a waiter's pad in a Bistro was unlike any known sort of arithmetic, and having mastered this new science it was used to create the Bistro drive which could sling spaceships round the universe at phenomenal speeds.

Well, Heaven's arithmetic is also different. I do not think it would have mattered how many folk attended one of those gatherings, 1000 or 50,000, those five loaves and two fish would still have gone round and everyone would still have had sufficient. The only difference would have been the number of baskets of scraps: the more people, the more bits dropped and the more baskets.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg. If we were omnipotent, as God is, then we would know how many people have lived on this planet. It would be a large number, but it could be written down, it is not infinite any more than the number of grains of sand on the seashore is infinite. Similarly, if we knew the typical number of wrongs we do in our lives it too would be finite (after all, Satan is keeping a list of them so as to accuse us before God). Now if those two large numbers are multiplied together, the number of people there ever have been or will be, and the typical number of sins per lifetime, you get a very large number indeed – but it is still finite. And this is the number of sins God has set out to forgive and 'cover'.

But God does not mess about with small change. Jesus, his immortal son, is infinite (unlike us who have a beginning and, physically, an end) and he pays the price

with his infinite life. It is gross over-payment. It is an infinite payment when a finite would suffice – no wonder Satan could never imagine such an action – but God had nothing less to give. The bottom line of Heaven's accounts can never be made to balance.

And the reason for telling you all this? To emphasise the importance of realising who Jesus is. Had a man lived a perfect life and died such an unjust death as Jesus, what would that achieve? The right to forgive one sin? Or another man's lifetime of sins? Or could he forgive anyone – except those who had sinned against him?

But the fact that Jesus is God blows all such arguments away. Christ is infinite, his death can cover the results of all sin throughout all time, and as it was God we sinned against, so he is the one entitled to forgive.

Grasping who Jesus is is essential, and I cannot state this too strongly. It is fundamental to the whole plan of salvation.

God's intention was to offer salvation as a gift to those who took notice and wanted to restore their relationship with him. He was not going to force this salvation on everyone whether they wanted him or not. It was a gift that had to be seen for what it was and accepted, or taken.

If Christ lived a perfect life and died incognito then yes, salvation would still be available to all, just as it is now, but who would have heard of it? If we had, we would put it down to yet another miscarriage of justice, and get on with life. He would just be a myth of history like the Egyptian or Norse myths. It was *essential* that Christ was recognised for who he is, and be recognised beyond all doubt, and by men willing to die rather than deny that knowledge. People had to know throughout eternity that it was God on that cross, that is the key

to the Bible, and it was up to those disciples to ensure this happened.

Now that I have laboured this point we can turn to tonight's passage.

The four gospels do not each contain all the 'stories'. Only two describe Christ's birth, but all four record his death, and all four contain the resurrection, even though we have lost the end of Mark's account of it.

And all four contain this story of the feeding of the 5000, in fact it is the only miracle recorded by all four other than the resurrection. So the incident was seen as being very important. And if further proof of this is needed, Jesus repeats the miracle with 4000, and afterwards reminds his disciples of it and asks "Do you still not understand?"

CHART showing coverage of events

Now this 4000 incident raises a difficulty. Here we are with Mark 6, but it is in Mark 8 that the symbolic meaning of the food is hinted at (and explained in more detail by John). It is not part of tonight's passage.

So, while acknowledging that this symbolic aspect is a crucial part of the story, I will not enlarge upon it.

End of CHART

Over the past weeks we have seen Christ laying situation after situation before the disciples to demonstrate who he is. He has and will fulfil a number of OT prophecies before their eyes. In this passage he again challenges his disciples as to who he is, forcing them to make a decision. Also in tonight's passage he teaches them how to feed his sheep and what sort of food sheep need.

If we think back to last week's passage, what the 12 apostles had so wanted to talk about on returning from their mission was giving to the people what Jesus had

given them, and the results. And note that they are here called apostles, and that is just what they have been, Christ's ambassadors in his absence.

Jesus knew the importance of this talking. All men need their times of quiet and winding down, and it is easy to forget that Jesus too had taken on a man's body with a man's requirements. To escape the constant interruptions of their lifestyle he suggests they take a break. So we see that having time off, even from God's work, is God approved – remember Christ's comment that 'the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath'.

We might think, as the disciples appeared to, that the quiet place Christ has in mind was the solitary spot on the far side of the sea. In fact only Christ got any peace and solitude there. So possibly the quiet break was to be the trip across, which would have taken just a few hours. Possibly the journey was as short as four miles, whereas the crowd (including women and children) would have to travel twice as far along the lake shore path and in the process cross the Jordan and other streams.

MAP

Mark tells of 'a boat', and John tells us there was only one. So it was a sizable vessel. It had room for 13 men (maybe others) plus, presumably, 12 fishing baskets – so the boat was around the size of a ship's lifeboat, 25-30', and weighing in at around a ton. Not the fastest vessel to row, as those who have tried to row a 20' half-decker will tell you (admittedly half-deckers have very short oars).

Whether the disciples rowed or sailed we are not told, in fact the word 'sail' only occurs in the NT in Acts, and then only in connection with salt water.

One of Arthur Ransome's friends used to refer to the

absurd slowness of boats compared to land, and this is, in many ways, true. It is also an almost effortless form of progress: silent, congenial (all facing inboard) and probably the most relaxing form of transport ever, with little else to do but talk and perhaps eat, even for folk rowing. Nothing is recorded of the chatter during that voyage, and by the time they reach the far side they have to get back to work – once more in the role of disciples, not apostles.

Whether the crowds were waiting for them, or got there soon after their arrival depends on how words are translated. It would seem likely that the boat would arrive first, and the crowds scrambling along the shore would be visible throughout the voyage, and the boat would thus have the initiative, and could have deliberately landed a bay or so ahead of the crowd. Jesus' reaction was that of compassion, the caring shepherd. We are not told the reaction of the disciples.

Nor are we told the detail of what Christ taught those crowds or what he did (other than a vague 'healed the sick' and Luke's 'spoke of the Kingdom'). Interestingly Mark, the author of the youthful, fast-moving, action-packed gospel, never mentions the healing, only the teaching.

All four Gospel writers jump straight to the business of the food; which underlines its importance. Was it that the disciples were hungry and they brought the subject up? Or did Christ raise it beforehand to Philip to 'test' them (as per John's account) – or both? We can't tell. But we do know that he intended to 'test', meaning teach, them something, and had to keep his teeth in to get the lesson across. People learn best by doing, not by simply being shown. 'You feed them' Christ instructs – stunned horror – tentative suggestions – no one dared say 'how?'. He follows the amazing order with 'how many loaves have you?' – no reaction – too few, far too few, the disciples knew this and thought it must be

obvious. Getting no answer Christ makes the question more specific: 'go and find out'. And finally he gets Andrew's answer, a mixture of faith and unfaith. There was his faithful reply of 'a boy has five loaves and two fish', followed by his statement of unfaith: 'But what are they among so many?'. Jesus neither praises his faith (or that of the boy), nor does he censor Andrew's lack of faith. He acts. He has got them on the path he wanted.

The stunned disciples had initially taken a practical approach, but Jesus wanted them to look beyond what human resources they had, and look to him – as per the lesson he had given them in the stilling of the storm where they had only expected him to help bail the boat but got much more.

Now here there are dangers. This is not an instruction to sit back and 'let the Spirit flow'. We are to prepare. We are to be practical. We have our part to do, and we are to ask God to do his part (remember how Jesus remained asleep until called upon? He wants to be asked: Lewis gave Aslan this characteristic, too, if you remember). We are to bring what we have, bring our best, it will not be adequate ... until God blesses it.

That a practical approach is necessary we can see by Christ demanding one. Look how he gets the disciples to organise the crowds into groups of 50s and 100s (or possibly 100 groups of 50), all sitting down tidily on the green grass (I'll come back to this 'green' business). Perhaps the crowd sat in neat rows so the disciples could walk along offering food to each individual. Compare that to us lot during communion, sitting higgldy-piggldy and not in alternate rows, making it difficult for the servers. (The word translated 'groups' also means 'garden beds', like allotments.) Christ instructs his disciples to take a practical approach in organising things, but the disciples are to look to him for what they are to offer the sheep, and this is one of

the big lessons of the event, and it is a lesson to us today.

What we have to offer is Christ, the practicalities of how we do this is up to us.

A further lesson the disciples are learning is not to side-step trying or awkward situations – think of other occasions when the disciples suggested sending people in need away and how Christ reacted to this (the children, or that Syrophenician woman in Matthew).

Rationalists try to explain away this miracle, even though all four gospels record it, and, I repeat, it is the only miracle recorded in all four. Some rationalists claim the numbers were exaggerated despite all the witnesses saying 5000 men (and most say plus women & children). Do these people really think that five loaves and two fish would have been enough even for the twelve disciples, and then go on to produce even one basket of scraps?

Other rationalists claim that the people already had picnics with them which the disciples never noticed as they distributed microscopic portions of the five loaves and two fish round 5000 people. Odd that all 5000 had brought identical picnics and no cheese or meat or fruit were picked up with the scraps. Some rational thinking! What if engineers thought that way when designing, say, a ship! Though we'd probably be safe from their creations; the chances of one making it further than the bottom of the slipway would be slim.

Now to the food, Christ uses it as a lesson in God's provision, and Christ intended hammering that lesson home by repeating the miracle and questioning the disciples about it. ('God's Provision of what' I'll leave for whoever takes the feeding of the 4000).

But I can tell you this much: don't expect bounteous food to miraculously appear whenever we get several

thousand to a church meeting. These occasions were Christ giving a lesson to his disciples.

But we are to expect bounteous provision.

This miracle, in being repeated a second time, is possibly unique. Normally God's actions can not be predicted, not even from past experience. Even where God has made promises and we therefore know he will answer, we can not predict the method. Expect the unexpected and you will be agreeably surprised.

So why did Christ make them pick up the bits?

To leave the Earth as tidy as we found it, perhaps? No, the birds would soon devour those scraps of food. There is no record of any attempt to tidy up the road to Jerusalem after Palm Sunday and that was a regular tip!

Was it to impress the crowds? When did Jesus use such methods?

To avoid waste? Well, John reports his words as 'Let nothing be wasted,' so maybe it was to be their evening meal. But who wanted half-eaten scraps off the ground? And with a fishing-basket per apostle, would they be able to eat it all before it went off in that hot climate? And if waste was to be avoided, how does this square with the wasteful sower scattering good seed on rocks and thorns and roads? Or the over abundance of manna and quails in the wilderness?

No. Picking up the bits has to be to teach the disciples something, and this is confirmed in Christ's conversation with the disciples after the feeding of the four thousand – it was not a lesson about efficient household management. So in a few weeks you will hear the answer to this question. But sufficient for the moment to say that the disciples had yet to make the connection between this physical food, Christ's deity, our spiritual needs and their long-term task on Earth.

Was it also significant that Passover with all its symbolism was imminent, and would have been in peoples' minds? How do we know? Well, apart from the fact that John tells us, remember that strange reference to 'green' grass? Well green = time of Passover. Mark's target audience was not Jews so 'Passover' would have been meaningless, whereas 'green' tells what time of year it was. And before some clown asks what other colours grass comes in; the alternative was the withered, brown grass of this summer.

If some of these lessons burnt their way into the disciples' understanding, little of it reached the crowd. Only John records the crowd's reaction – they saw Jesus as a free meal ticket to get what they wanted, and were threatening to MAKE him king (whereas the disciples were learning to recognise him AS king). The disciples are sent off in the boat. Why? Perhaps because they did not yet understand, and hence would have also wanted him made king. Perhaps because Christ needed some time alone. Perhaps both.

We know from history that the situation was dangerous. Had that crowd proclaimed him the sort of king they wanted then the sort of popular uprising that happened in AD70 might have flared up there and then. We know that in AD70, on taking Jerusalem, the Romans killed around 2 million Jews – a bigger massacre than any other massacre in history. Hardly the sort of thing Christ came to achieve. Decisive action was necessary.

We are given no details of what Christ said or did to divert the crowd and send it home, or what he prayed about once he was alone in the hills. Three of the gospel writers pick up the narrative again with Jesus alone on the shore in the dark, and the disciples struggling against the wind around 3 to 4 miles out. Luke omits this part of the action, though perhaps records the conversation aboard the boat.

Galilee appears to be around 100-150 feet deep. Most of the Lake District lakes are around 200 feet deep, so they would behave in a similar manner. Our lake bottoms go down below sea level, but Galilee's surface is almost 700 feet below sea level. Like our lakes it is fresh water. It would develop regular waves which, compared to the sea, would be 'short', or close together and there would be small 'white horses' in the middle with diminutive rollers where it got shallow. The children who were immortalised as the Swallows were not allowed to sail in such conditions, but rowing in them was not considered hazardous. The fishermen would be used to all this. They do not appear to be in any danger, unlike that previous occasion of an exceptionally fierce storm. Just a hard slog at the oars into the teeth of a strong wind and a short sea as they struggle to reach their objective.

Now if something is not going well, should we immediately question whether we have missed God's guidance or sinned? Not a bit of it. This is not how God works anyway. The disciples are exactly where Jesus told them to be, they are probably rowing four or even six up, all powerful, experienced men, and making little progress. But that is precisely where Jesus wanted them, and he is coming to continue their teaching. So take note that obedience to God is no guarantee of rapid progress or a smooth ride. God's path for us may, and probably does, pass through some rough weather.

It seems unlikely that Jesus could see them on a dark night four miles away in rough water, but he knows where they are, and walks after them, a walk of around one and a half hours assuming he went directly at normal walking speeds. What speeds one can maintain on water against a stiff wind I have no idea as I have no personal experience. But if you want an intriguing account of the feeling, try *The Great Divorce*.

The disciples had set off at dusk, say 6 o'clock. But

Jesus does not arrive till after 3 in the morning. They had been rowing for around nine hours. It sounds a lot but having done similar as a youth (admittedly in fine weather) it is not as bad as it might sound. And the fishermen among them would be used to working and rowing all night. Nothing in this passage suggests to me that the disciples were in danger or exhausted or in dire need of help other than a cure for frustration.

Now we see something that might seem odd: Jesus 'acting a part' and making as if to walk past. Surely God would be straight and open with us, and not try to deceive us? What else was he there for other than to see them? But there are other examples: We read that he did just the same on the road to Emmaus – he made as if to go on when Mr (& Mrs?) Cleopas came to their house and stopped. There was that business of the lying spirit in the OT. Maybe Christ was feigning sleep aboard that boat in the storm. Sleeping in such conditions is no easy matter – I've tried, and on much bigger boats, too. It seems God may deliberately hide his intentions, but he is good, and it will be for our benefit.

He tests the disciples, just as he had in the stilling of the storm. He wants them to seek his involvement in all aspects of their lives. When he had stilled that storm the situation was getting out of control, but this time his disciples are still masters of the situation even if they have been nine hours or so rowing and going nowhere. Would they look for his involvement?

Jesus makes as if to pass them. They fail to recognise him and are terrified. But Christ soon blows away any superstitious ideas about ghosts. Did the incorrectly constructed sentence 'It is I' (rather than 'It's me') carry the hint of 'I am' in it, God's title, a further hint as to who he was?

It is only Matthew who tells us of Peter's reaction, which is interesting. Many suggest that Mark got his information from Peter. If so why did not Mark record

Peter's brief walk on the waves? Perhaps Peter thought it might make him look over-important and asked Mark to omit it. It certainly must have looked spectacular. As Alon Taffs pointed out, if 'water walking' was a spiritual gift would many go in for the less spectacular, more easily imitated 'tongues'? How soon the gift and the recipient take on a greater importance than the giver.

Were it not for Matthew we might think Jesus got no useful response from the disciples, and that he had to actually persuaded them to let him join them aboard the boat. But Matthew records Peter's faith in his master when he asks Jesus to command him to join him, and Jesus' implied approval in his 'come'. Even when Peter doubts, he still calls to Jesus. But I am drifting into Matthew, not Mark 6.

The wind is stilled, and they discover they are close to their journey's end (John). Their reaction is amazement, though they had seen it all before. And Mark then adds that frustrating 'for they had not understood about the loaves, their hearts were hardened.' Which makes me ask, 'Do I understand?'

Well, this account was written by the disciples years later with the benefit of hindsight. Mark is saying: 'How *could* we have been so blind?'. It was all so obvious once they realised. They had asked the pertinent question at the end of that real storm in Mark 4: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" But they had got no answer at the time.

Matthew now gives us the answer. At the end of the walking on water incident the disciples worship Christ and recognise him as the 'Son of God' (not the 'Son of Man' as Jesus called himself).

We are now back with what I see as the main thrust of the passage – who Jesus is. Familiarity has dulled our minds. Yes, we do understand. Jesus is God. It was God who took our punishment on that cross.

It seems hard that the disciples accused themselves of having hardened hearts. The recognition of Christ's deity was an unprecedented, previously unimaginable step. God in a man's body! All the authority and power of God, and yet truly man! Unthinkable! But they were slowly being forced to this conclusion by Jesus' actions and the total lack of any other reasonable or unreasonable explanation.

And maybe Luke is also telling us the answer at this point. He places Peter's confession of 'you are the Christ' immediately after the feeding of the 5000, so maybe he is recording some of the later conversation aboard that boat - which he simply refers to as a 'private place'.

Mark, as a Jew, would know the Old Testament (not that it was called that then). Was he thinking of Ezekiel when he stated that Jesus saw the crowds as 'sheep without a shepherd'? Listen and see who will come as the shepherd in Ezekiel 34:1-16, and realise the barrage of proofs Jesus was subjecting them to.

Clare reads Ezekiel 34:1-16

And next day was business as usual, with folk arriving from the whole region and Jesus spending time teaching and healing - shepherding them, God himself at work.

So the question I ask is the one the disciples asked: Who is this man? Do you recognise him? Do you realise the significance of this knowledge?

Let us praise God for his infinite love by singing 193