The Leaven of the Pharisees and Herod
Mark 8:1-21

We're approaching the half way point of Mark's gospel. And next week we get to the pivot point, the question the whole first half of the book's been building up to, as Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them, 'Who do you say that I am?'

Arguably, it's the most important question any of us have to face: who do you think Jesus of Nazareth is?

And Mark's been giving evidence to help us come to a decision. Last week, we saw a girl delivered of a demon, simply by Jesus telling her mother it was done - 'The demon has left your daughter.' Which means that Jesus can will something, from a distance, and command the powers of evil, and it's done. We saw him heal a deaf man with a speech impediment - by touching his ears and spitting and touching his tongue, almost as if he's re-enacting God forming Adam from the ground.

And Mark wants us to grapple with the question, Who is he? Who can do this sort of thing?

But if you're wrestling with that, you're not alone, because Mark shows us others wrestling with exactly that question.

There's the gentile, Syrophoenician woman, whose daughter was delivered, who gets who Jesus is and trusts him. But here, in today's passage, are the Pharisees, and they're looking at exactly the same evidence, but they're coming to very different conclusions.

And in between are the disciples, same evidence, same data, but do they get it, or don't they?

But there's another question this passage deals with, and the answer to this question helps answer the key question of Jesus' identity. And that question is 'who or what can satisfy you?' You see, there's a sense in which everyone of us is searching for meaning and purpose and fulfilment in life. That you matter, that you count. We all need that. But who or what can give you that? Who or what can give you that sense of being satisfied, of being able to stop searching because you've come home?

Well, Mark doesn't just answer that, he also tells you what the competition looks like.

In Search of Satisfaction
One of our daughters was recently in the UK. And when she got back she said, 'I could never live in the UK.' 'Really?' we said. 'Was it the weather? Too hot and sunny?' 'No' she said, 'it's the bread. It's terrible. It comes already sliced, and in plastic bags, and it tastes of nothing. In fact, the plastic bag tastes better.'

Imagine deciding your future on the quality of bread! And yet, it's not so stupid is it? because this passage tells you *there is* a link between your future and bread - just not what you think. You see, there issue of bread runs through this part of Mark's gospel. The Syrophoenician woman wants healing for her daughter, and Jesus says, it's not right to throw the children's bread to dogs. Sure, the woman says, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs. Jesus feeds a crowd of thousands with

bread. And the disciples are in a boat discussing about…? Bread. And Jesus uses *that* to talk about leaven, the stuff that makes bread rise.

Why? Because at one level bread is about what you eat when you're hungry, but at another it's about what fills a far deeper hunger. When you're hungry not for food, but for meaning and purpose and for answers to the great questions of life.

But as you watch Jesus feeding this crowd of 4000, you'd be forgiven for a sense of deja vu. Is this just a different retelling of the feeding of the 5000. Does Mark just need an editor? No. Look how it starts, v1, 'In those days…'.

In what days? In the days when, Mark tells us in chapter 7:31, Jesus was 'in the region of the Decapolis.' Which was Gentile territory. And among all the differences between the accounts of the feeding of the 5000 and here of the 4000 that's arguably the biggest. Because the feeding of the 5000 was feeding 5000 or more Jews. But here Jesus is faced with a crowd of thousands of Gentiles. People like the Syrophoenician woman. People like you and me. It's why in v3 Jesus says some of them 'have come from far away.' It's the way Jewish people spoke of Gentiles - people from far away. Like an Englishman might refer to Americans as from 'across the pond'. And after 3 days with him, these 'far away' people, people separated from Israel and her God, are running short of food.

So what's Jesus' response to their need? Verse 2, "I have *compassion* on the crowd." It's an interesting word. It comes from the word for your intestines. We might say 'Jesus' *heart* was moved with compassion'. But what Mark actually says is that Jesus feels a gut wrenching emotion for them. Why?

Well, at one level, you might say Jesus knows what it's like to be hungry in a wilderness, when satan tempted him to turn stone into bread. But it's deeper than that, isn't it? Jesus looks at them and sees their needs, from the most basic need for food, up to their need for God: for their alienation from God to be ended, their need to be brought in and brought home; their need for forgiveness, and meaning, and purpose. And he feels that - the need to be filled. Starting with their stomachs.

But if that's how Jesus responds, what about the disciples?

Verse 4, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" Now you might think, 'o come on, if this really happened and if the feeding of the 5000, back in chapter 6, really happened, why not just say to Jesus, 'come on Jesus, let's see you do the bread trick again! Do what you did before.'

Except, how long does it typically take you to learn a lesson? I was once told that in a company it takes at least 7 times to communicate the same message before it really sinks in. And sure, we're not companies, but have you ever found yourself saying, 'boy I can't believe I made that mistake again, I really should have learnt my lesson by now.'

But there's another reason: Jesus never presents himself as a vending machine, does he? Put your money in, give it a bit of a shake, pick your miracle, and out pops bread for thousands. I mean, Switzerland must be the only country in the world where the vending machines offer you cheese. But not even here do the vending machines offer you bread to go with the fondue.

And to imagine the disciples would slap Jesus on the back and do the equivalent of stick coins in the slot and choose the 'bread for 4000' option is to fail to understand the character of the man they're standing alongside.

So their question hangs in the air, doesn't it? How can one feed all these people in this desolate place? Meaning, no one can feed all these people in this desolate place.

Except, Jesus asks how many loaves they have, the answer comes back, 'seven', and sits them all down and v6, 'Having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.' And v8, 'They ate and were satisfied.'

So the gentile, Syrophoenician woman asked Jesus for crumbs under the table, and here is Jesus standing before a crowd of gentiles setting the table and he doesn't give them crumbs, but a feast. And the disciples get an answer to their question: Who can feed these people with bread in this desolate place? Jesus can.

In fact, when they ask 'how can one feed these people' the word for 'feed' is the same word in v8 that's translated 'satisfy'. Who can satisfy all these people? Who can feed them? Who can send them away full? And the answer is, Jesus can.

And from the earliest days, the church fathers realised that Jesus feeding all these Gentiles wasn't just about him satisfying their physical hunger. It was pointing forwards to how Jesus and only Jesus can satisfy, not just the Jewish people, but all people. Everyone who is from far away.

So, the question is, what do you look to for that inner satisfaction? What can leave you feeling like you've been fed, and you can stop searching, that you're complete. And what can do that for you, not just when life is good and you're getting everything you want, but when life is like a desolate place? When all that is good feels like it's been stripped away.

Well, Mark tells us what can't do it.

Two Wrong Ways

And Jesus leaves this gentile region and returns to a Jewish one, and v11, 'The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.' So while the Syrophoenician woman came asking for mercy, knowing that even crumbs from Jesus could satisfy her need, and while a crowd of thousands of Gentiles went home satisfied by Jesus, the Pharisees have come to argue.

But that's the problem with religious legalism, isn't it? You see, when you think that to be right in God's sight you have to prove yourself, that you have to satisfy him by your moral conduct or your religious zeal, by you being better than others, you're going to be argumentative. Because you're always going to have to prove you're right and others are wrong. Your identity, your significance, is going to be tied up with being right.

And to prove Jesus is *not* right they demand a sign. They've seen exactly the same evidence as the Syrophoenician woman, but that's not enough, they want something more. A sign in the heavens. Something to prove beyond doubt Jesus is someone special.

Now, I once heard a story of a couple married for 40 years. And they still got on, but the wife had a complaint, and one day she said to her husband, who was a farmer, 'We've been married for 40 years and you never tell me you love me.' To which the husband replied, 'I told you I loved you on our wedding day and if I change my mind I'll let you know.' Which, for you young guys getting married is maybe not the best approach.

But imagine the husband *had* told her he loved her, but that didn't satisfy her, and she said, 'no, prove to me you love me'. What could he do? He could buy her flowers, couldn't he? He could do the washing up, tidy up after himself, put out the bins, make 'I love you' the first thing he said at the beginning of the day and the last thing at the end of the day.

But none of those would be enough unless his wife wanted to believe it. If she's already decided, 'he doesn't love me', nothing he can do can prove it to her. For evidence to be enough, there has to be an openness to trust it.

And the same is true of faith. And the person who asks for evidence for the existence of God, or the resurrection of Christ, may be genuinely seeking the truth. But the person who demands cast iron proof has probably already made their mind up.

When I first became a Christian I was trying to persuade one of my friends at school to join me, but despite all my best arguments and all evidence I could give him for the truth of Christianity, he refused. And I was getting frustrated. And I ended up saying, 'Listen, if I could *prove* to you all this was true, would you believe?' And he said, 'no'. At at least he was being honest!

The American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, who is an atheist, wrote, 'I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.' (The Last Word, OUP, 1997). He sees the same evidence as you and me, but he doesn't want to believe it. But again, at least he's honest.

Now, why say all that? Because maybe you're here and you're not yet a Christian, but you've got questions. Which is great. Seek answers to those questions. But maybe they're less questions and more demands for proof before you'll believe. And if that's you, in all your asking, ask a question of yourself as well: am I really open to the evidence I have or, like my school friend, or Thomas Nagel, or these Pharisees before them, have I already prejudged it? Ask yourself, what level of proof will be enough, and why?

And knowing what's going on, Mark tells us, v12, that Jesus 'sighed deeply in his spirit.' Because Jesus doesn't just feel compassion for a crowd of gentiles, he feels sorrow at the refusal of deeply religious people to truly believe. But if you look, it's not just the Pharisees he's groaning for. Verse 12-13, "Why does *this generation* seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them.' In other words, the problem of a refusal to believe wasn't limited to them. No miracle is sufficient for the sceptic determined to cling to his or her scepticism.

But what's interesting here is that Jesus makes clear that this unbelief can take two forms. And on the surface they look totally different from each other, but both will stop you ever knowing the deep satisfaction you're looking for.

Look at v14-15. Jesus and the disciples get into a boat, head for the other side of the lake and 'They had forgotten to bring bread… And he [Jesus] cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."'

Now, when someone tells you 'Watch out!', do you? It depends on the context and the person saying it, doesn't it. Su and I start getting nervous when our girls get too close to an edge, like a cliff, and we're forever telling them 'watch out!' And they routinely ignore it, because they know it's just mum and dad being anxious. But if they were on a narrow mountain ridge and they were with a skilled mountain guide and he said, 'watch out!' they'd listen!

And when it comes to life, Jesus is that skilled guide, so when he says 'watch out' we should.

But look what he says we should watch out for: v15 again, "The leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they are about as far apart as you could get. The Pharisees, doing everything possible to obey God's law and make themselves right with him. And Herod, happy to break God's law if it makes him feel good and look good, who will compromise principle for power and getting what he wants. One the conservative religious person, - we need to get back to the law, back to morality; the other, the secular, progressive pragmatist - if it feels good, and if it works, do it.

And both, Jesus says, are like leaven. Because like yeast in a batch of dough, their influence in your life has the power to profoundly shape your life. But not in good ways.

Because both tell you, you're the answer to your problems. The solution lies within you. You want that sense of significance, that you matter, that God approves of you, that you're forgiven? Well, work hard, obey God's law, live a highly moral life and then he'll accept you. Satisfy him and he'll satisfy you. Or, you want to be satisfied? You want a life that's full? Well, pursue pleasure, live life, do what feels right and good for you. You be you.

But both, Jesus is saying, will fail you. Look for inner satisfaction, for meaning, for purpose, for significance, for forgiveness, to be filled with the bread of life, within yourself, through conservative religious values or progressive secularism, and you'll never find it. Ultimately, they'll send you away empty.

Legalistic religion will leave you burdened and unsure that you've done enough, or it will leave you proud and self-satisfied and with it argumentative, because deep down you're not satisfied, because you've still got to prove you're right. While secularism and the pursuit of pleasure, or more stuff, might satisfy for a time, but then it wears off and you have to look for the next high. As that great British philosopher, Mick Jagger sang, 'I can't get no satisfaction.' Or, as Jenny Lind sings in The Greatest Showman - 'All the shine of a thousand spotlights, all the stars we steal from the night sky, will never be enough, never be enough; Towers of gold are still too little, these hands could hold the world but it'll never be enough…' without someone else's husband.

So, you can try and obey all the rules like the Pharisees, or like Herod you can try and break them all, but neither will deliver deep inner satisfaction.

So what can?

The Way of Faith

Well, the disciples hear Jesus's warning, and what do they do? They go back to arguing over bread and whose to blame for their lack of it. And v17, 'Jesus, aware of this said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?" And he peppers them with questions: Do you not perceive? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but not see and ears but not hear? Don't you remember? Until v21 he ends with, "Do you not yet understand?"

Understand what? That life is not ultimately about bread, it's not ultimately about having all your physical needs met - it's about him, and that he's the One who can do what the rule keeping of the Pharisees and the rule-breaking of Herod can never do. And that's satisfy you.

In Deuteronomy chapter 8, Moses is reminding Israel of how God provided them with manna in the wilderness. Verse 3, "He [God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna… that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In other words, he's saying what deep down you already know, that you can have all your physical needs met, and still be hungry for something more: For that which really satisfies. And Jesus comes and, commenting on that passage, says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger" (John 6:35). I'm the one who can feed you. I'm the one who can satisfy you. But you've got to come to me. You've got to trust me.

In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:22-24). And here are the Pharisees demanding signs, demanding proof, because they think life is about proving yourself. And elsewhere is Herod, pursuing the wisdom of the world, thinking that image and self fulfilment will satisfy. But both miss the boat. Because, as Paul says, it's in Christ and him crucified that we find both the power and the wisdom of God - because it's in Christ's death and resurrection that our deepest needs are met.

You see, it's there that you discover you are loved so much Jesus died for you. Which means, you're not just loved, you matter. It's there that you find an answer to that nagging sense that you're not good enough, because he bore the penalty of your sin and you're forgiven. It's there that you can find purpose and meaning for life - because if God loves you like this, what's there to do in life but glorify him and enjoy him forever? You see Jesus can do for you what religion and secularism can never do. And that's satisfy you.