

Signs and Saints

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 8)

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The Gospel According to Mark Chapter 8

Our study of the Gospel of Mark continues today in chapter 8.

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said,

"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also

and told the disciples to distribute them.

The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha (8:1-10).

Mark tells us, now, about a second event in which Jesus feeds the crowd. This time there are four thousand people, whom he feeds with a few fish and seven barley loaves. In the first incident, in chapter 6, there were five thousand men and twelve baskets, or containers, of leftovers collected. This time there are four thousand, and seven baskets of leftovers. The numbers must mean something, because Mark doesn't just give us details like this for no reason. Numbers are important in the Bible; they point beyond themselves to reveal the hidden workings of God.

When, in chapter 6, we found five thousand men whom Jesus feeds with five loaves, that should make us think of the five books in the Torah, the Law of Moses. And twelve baskets are left over, reminding us of the twelve tribes in Israel. Something is being said about the way Jesus is rebuilding Israel, the people God called to serve him in a special way. Here in chapter 8 there are four thousand men, which might remind us of the four directions of worldwide humanity — north, south, east, west — or the four cherubim guarding the ark of the covenant in the Temple of Solomon. And there are seven loaves. We know how often that number appears in Scripture, usually in connection with declaring loyalty to the covenant the Lord is offering his people. (In fact the Hebrew word for swearing an oath means, literally, to "seven oneself.") Again, the numbers suggest that Jesus, in feeding four thousand with seven loaves, is doing something to make real how the Lord is raising up a new Israel to fulfill the worldwide purpose for which he called Israel's forefather Abraham. When Jesus feeds the multitudes and numbers like these turn up — five, twelve, four, seven — we see he's declaring who he is: Israel's Messiah, the Son of God who has come to reestablish God's faithful community and extend it to people the world over. Through time that faithful community has been called the "Communion of Saints," and it's worth noting that today, November 1, is traditionally known as All Saints Day. (I'll say more about that later.)

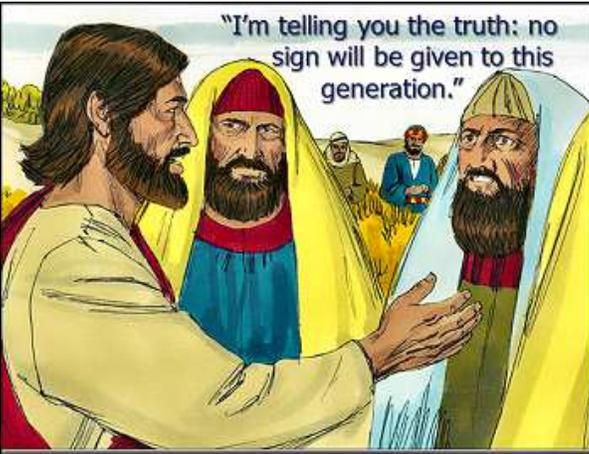


We can focus on the "miracle," the remarkable sign in which Jesus feeds a hungry crowds with only a few scraps of food, and we can marvel at the revelation of the Creator God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, who has authority over even the elements of material "stuff." But can we also "work the numbers," and see another hidden significance in what Jesus does? Here's a question for you and me: **Do I understand that my faith**

in Jesus isn't just about me, but it's about the larger community Jesus is building — the community of God's covenant, the community of the faithful saints?

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it" (8:11-12).

The Pharisees, Mark tells us, were asking Jesus for a "sign." In this Gospel context, a "sign" is some kind of miraculous event that supposedly would certify, in their sight, that Jesus has truly come from God. But Jesus turns them down: "No sign will be given to this generation," the people he's living among and dealing with at



this time. Mark has abbreviated this event; from Matthew and Luke we learn that the only "sign" they'll get will be his preaching, his message of the kingdom of God. If they won't accept his announcement that the Lord has returned to his people — if they won't accept that message on the authority of Jesus himself, but resist it instead — then no "sign" will make any difference to them. If your mind is made up and you're just not open to what God is doing, no miracle will change it.

When the apostle Paul wrote, "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22), perhaps he had this incident in mind. And what Paul offered people instead was what he was preaching: a man dying on a Roman cross. That message doesn't resonate with people who expect the gospel to be validated by something else: either some great miracle that

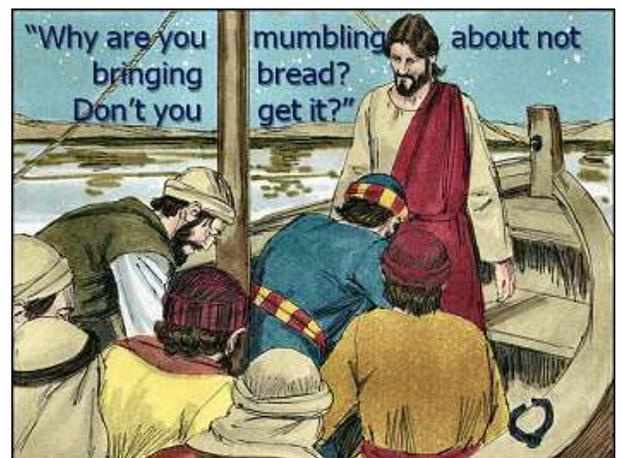
"proves" God is real, like the "sign" the Pharisees demanded, or some clever, impressive explanation like the "wisdom" the Greeks expected. So we could be asking ourselves these questions: **Am I a "Jew," demanding that God prove himself to me with a miracle? Am I a "Greek," ready to believe only when it all makes sense? Or do I accept the message of the kingdom of God just because of the authority with which Jesus speaks?**

Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.

"Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?" (8:13-21)

So often, up to this point in Mark's narrative, we've see how the disciples "didn't get it," in spite of everything they'd heard from Jesus and everything they'd seen him do. Peter, as we'll see in a moment, has stumbled upon the truth that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, but evidently the disciples aren't quite sure what that would mean for Israel and God's plan for the human race. Here, using the fact that the disciples had forgotten to buy bread before sailing across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus tries to make it clear to them. When they discover only one loaf in the boat, he comes out with a remark about leaven (which, of course, is used in baking bread): stay away from the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The disciples can't make sense of that, because they think Jesus is actually talking about bread. Of course (as we learn from Matthew) he's talking about the *teaching* of the Pharisees and the Herodians.



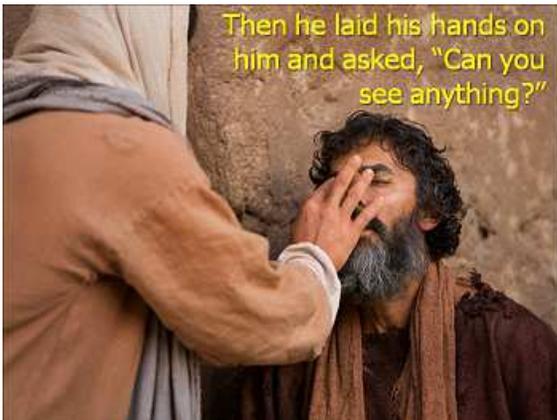
The Pharisees taught that all Jews needed to keep the Law of Moses in every detail, so Messiah would vindicate them and

free them from Roman domination. The Herodians had a different approach: Let's forget about Messiah and the destiny of Israel, let's just get along with Rome and live like the Greeks. Jesus has a third approach to Israel's problem: *God has returned to his people*, so let's get back to doing what he called Abraham to do, to extend God's family into the whole world. That means being God's servants, faithful to his gracious covenant with us. In other words, in what Jesus is doing Israel is being restored.

We spoke earlier about how important the numbers are as clues to what Jesus is up to: twelve baskets left over from the five loaves, then seven baskets from the seven loaves. And here, Jesus highlights those numbers: "Don't you remember the numbers?" As we saw, both of those numbers relate to Israel, and the Lord's covenant with his people. It's wonderful that, through his creative power, Jesus can feed a multitude with just somebody's sack lunch. But the numbers reveal that God is doing more than just opening a huge food pantry; he's restoring his family and calling it to be a blessing to all people. Maybe, with the disciples, we should "do the numbers" and ask ourselves this question: **Am I serving Jesus because I believe he can meet my personal needs, or am I serving him because I belong to his special family with a mission in the world?**

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village" (8:22-26).



I've often wondered about this incident. How did the blind man know what trees look like, when he said people looked like trees? To be accurate, though, Mark doesn't say the man was born blind so perhaps he remembered trees from earlier in his life. This event is interesting because, like the time Jesus healed the deaf man in the previous chapter, Jesus applies his own physical body to the man's condition, laying his hands on him. He does that twice, and gradually the man recovers his full sight. It takes a while for the virtue of the Son of God to permeate this man's body so he could be healed — but Jesus persists till the condition is gone and the man is whole. We need to pray for one another that we'll be healed of our diseases, and we need to share the healing virtue of Jesus among ourselves by the

physical touch Mark describes in this passage. So let's ask ourselves: **Will I be persistent in praying for myself and others, and in applying the methods Jesus used, so his healing can take effect?**

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

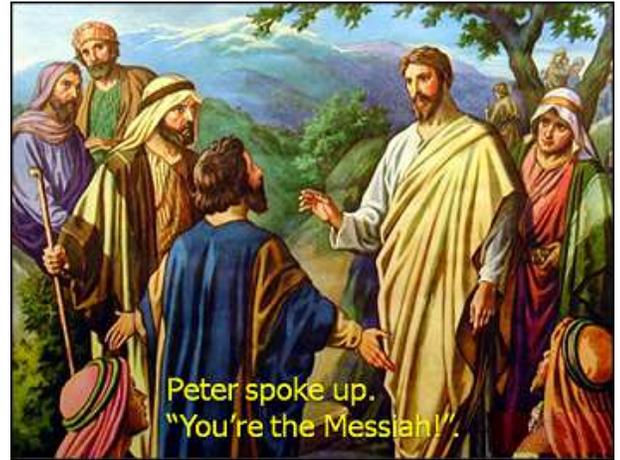
"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him (8:27-30)

Here is Mark's account of what we traditionally call "Peter's confession," when Simon Peter first acknowledges that Jesus is the "Christ," or Messiah of Israel. Notice that, once again, Mark leaves out the details. He doesn't include the part where Jesus tells Peter that he'll be the rock on which he will build his church; that's only in Matthew. As to why he left that out, your guess is as good as mine, especially since Mark is thought to have based his account on what Peter told him.

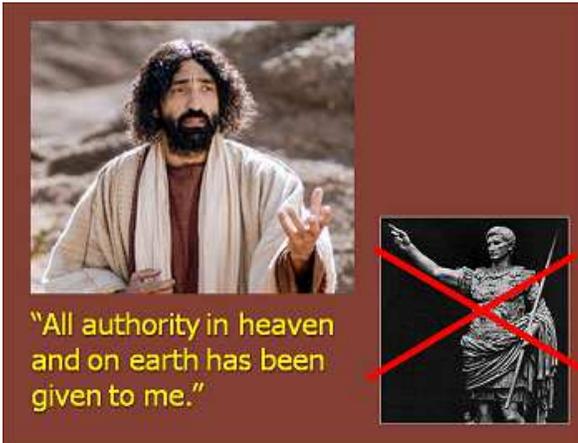
What's also interesting is the location where Peter makes this startling claim about Jesus. To curry favor with the Roman emperors to whom they owed their office, local rulers sometimes built cities in their honor. The more famous Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, had been built by "Herod the Great," the ruler over Judea when Jesus was born. During the period when Jesus was preaching it was the seat of the Roman governor of Judea. This Caesarea Philippi was a different city north of the Sea of Galilee. It was formerly called Panias after the Greek "god" Pan, but the tetrarch Herod Philip renamed it in honor of the Roman emperor.

(You'll remember Philip because his brother Herod Antipas took his wife away from him, incurring the wrath of John the Baptist.)

I say the location is interesting because it was in a city celebrating the power of Caesar, the ruler of the whole Mediterranean world, that Simon Peter first comes out with his "confession": You, Jesus, are the Messiah! To declare Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, or the "Christ," isn't just to claim he has authority over our spiritual lives. From the Hebrew Scriptures we learn that the Messiah, the Son of God, was to be ruler over all nations of the world. Just take these words from Psalm 2, where the Messiah speaks: "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession'" (Psalm 2:7-8). Those were the words spoken to Jesus at his baptism. And here at Caesarea Philippi, a location named for the Roman emperor who claimed to be the son of god and the world's ruler, Peter comes to a startling realization: It's Jesus who is *the real ruler* of all things, the Messiah of God. And, with that, comes the realization that Caesar is only a cheap imitation of the real authority, a mere footnote to a history that's heading toward that day when, as Habakkuk says, "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).



That's something to keep in mind when we watch the evening news, or read about the claims to authority by various world leaders or movements. However powerful these people may seem, *none of them has been raised from the dead* and shown to be the Messiah. None of them can make the claim the risen Jesus makes: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Of no one but Jesus can it be



said that he "upholds the universe with his word of power" (Hebrews 1:3). In the Roman world Caesar claimed to be god, and it's the same in our world: governments try to play god, regulating every area of life and, like Caesar, they claim to be the source of peace and welfare and security. The gospel proclaims otherwise: a man who died on a cross was raised up on the third day and exalted to rule with the Creator over all things. Here, then, is our next question: **As I watch the world news, and see the corruption of leaders and the degraded things some people are doing, can I put it all in perspective? Am I persuaded that in the long run these things can't stand against God's plan for the renewal of his creation?**

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (8:31-38).

We noted that November 1st is traditionally called "All Saints Day." It's a day that most evangelical Protestants don't observe, out of reaction to the multiplicity of "saints" and saints' days in other Christian bodies, especially the Roman Catholic Church. Sometimes Protestants observe it as Reformation Day, because it was on the eve of All Saints Day in 1517 that Martin Luther is said to have posted his ninety-five declarations on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany — the statement that initiated the Protestant Reformation.

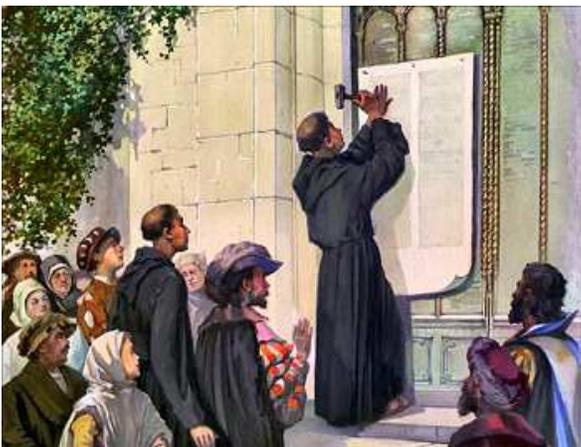
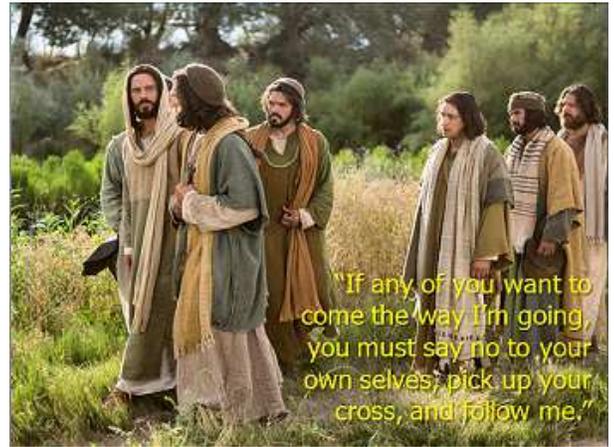
It's good to remember important events in church history, events that have shaped the faith as we now experience it. And maybe there's something useful about All Saints' Day, too. The Catholic Church is still naming people "saints," like Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II, but we don't usually refer to specific people as "saints" unless they're in the New Testament — like St. John or St. Paul or St. James — although speaking about important historical figures we might also refer to St. Augustine or St. Francis. In many Bible-believing churches it's not usual to designate any individual as "Saint Whoever." On the other hand, we know that in the New Testament *all Christians are called "saints,"* or "holy ones," because of the way Paul begins some of his letters like Ephesians: "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1). So perhaps you or I might actually be St. Timothy or St. Donna or St. Bonnie or even St. Richard.

Why do I mention this? Because "sainthood," or a character of holy and costly devotion to the Lord, might well apply to the people Jesus is appealing to in this passage from Mark, chapter 8: "If any of you want to come the way I'm going you must say no to your own selves, pick up your cross, and follow me." All Saints Day might be a good day to remember people through Christian history who've gone above and beyond, and made a special sacrifice of self or of personal comfort, to follow the way of the Lord. Many of these people are unknown to us, but others are well known such as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who framed the English Reformation and was martyred by being burned at the stake; George Müller who built orphanages in England, relying on prayer alone to supply the needs of children otherwise doomed to a horrible, abused life; or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who resisted the Nazis and was executed for it.

Jesus speaks of "taking up our cross" to follow him. The cross is Jesus' victory, his exposure of evil and death that leads to their defeat; but the cross is also the sacrifice of his life, the sacrifice that won that victory. Sometimes we can be flippant about "bearing our cross"; if we have a serious illness, or a family problem, or a financial reversal, we might say, "That's just a cross I have to bear." But such things are not the kind of cross Jesus is speaking of; his cross, and the cross of those who follow him, is *the cost of witnessing* to the reality and truth of God's action in Jesus and the emergence of his kingdom — his righteous rule over all things. It is the cost, indeed, being borne today by many Christians who have paid for their confession with their lives, in the face of militant Islam.

"Sainthood," bearing one's cross for Jesus — whatever that might be — is a challenge for each one of us. But it's a challenge with an outcome in mind. As Jesus said, "If you're ashamed of me and my words in this cheating and sinning generation, the son of man will be ashamed of you when he 'comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels'" (Mark 7:38). Taking up the cross of Jesus is something a Christian does with an eye to the future — not just a future in heaven, removed from the pain and turmoil of this life, but a future in which God brings in his new creation: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So it's not about me, and my possible future bliss somewhere way off in the clouds; *it's about God's plan for his world* and the people who are living it out. It's about how God will restore this world, one day, to the glory of the good creation it was in the beginning. To "take up our cross" means to do whatever it takes to get



with God's program, even in things that may seem small and insignificant like what we're doing together as a body of believers, at this time, in this community. As Psalm 149 puts it, "Let the saints rejoice in this honor . . . May the praise of God be in their mouths, and a double-edged sword in their hands" — the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God by which we live. In serving the Lord faithfully, each in our own way, we join that body of believer throughout all ages that the Apostles Creed calls the "Communion of Saints."

*For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest —
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

So here's our last question: **How are we "taking up our cross": doing those saintly things that might be difficult, or even daring, to build toward the new world God is bringing into being?**

Let's conclude by reviewing our questions arising from Mark, chapter 8:

- Do I see myself as a member of the "communion of saints," so my faith isn't just all about me?
- Do I believe the message of the kingdom of God or the authority of Jesus' word, or am I looking for some special "sign"?
- Do I serve Jesus because he meets *my* needs, or because I'm part of his larger mission in the world?
- In prayer, will I apply the methods Jesus used so his healing can take effect?
- Am I persuaded that evil forces in this world won't stand against God's plan for the renewal of his creation?
- Are we "taking up our cross," doing some challenging things that build toward the kingdom of God?

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