Sermon on Mark 8

St Francis 16th November 2014

10am

On Tuesday I went with Pam and Eileen to Clarendon house care home in Thornton Heath, where Joan Farmer is. We were there to do a memorial service on Remembrance Day, particularly for anyone who had died in the home in the last year and we were to invite anyone to light a candle for a loved one they had lost. Anyway, you always get a heckler in these situations! And sure enough there was one at the front who, as soon as we put the candles out on the tables started saying I’m not lighting a candle – I hate all that nonsense. And sure enough when we started the service she piped up “oh no not a service, why do have to put up with all that rubbish!” We ploughed on regardless and I’ll tell you more about what happened later!

This poor lady was expressing scepticism about this memorial service. I remember a young lad saying to me once, what’s the point of lighting a candle for someone – it won’t change anything at all. In one sense they are right. We live in a very sceptical and cynical age in a very sceptical and cynical country, the UK, where it’s far more fashionable and cool to be negative and critical than believing and positive. And why shouldn’t we? There are many charlatans around, who would deceive us with a smarmy smile and upbeat talk. Actually things were not much different in Jesus day, which is why he says “beware the yeast of the Pharisees”.

The Pharisees had just asked for a “sign from heaven”, not because they wanted to believe but because they wanted Jesus to fail, and this coming immediately after the feeding of the four thousand – just a minor miracle. It seems that the Pharisees fully understood that something extraordinary had taken place but that they doubted that it had come from God. I’ve met many people like that – when we’ve prayed for an answer to pray – for someone to recover from illness etc – they say, “it would have happened anyway”. They dismiss the idea that it is God at work. Are you ever like that?

So Jesus has nothing to do with it and says,

Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it

And then he says to the disciples, beware the yeast of the Pharisees, because this unbelieving is incredibly contagious and corrosive of faith, just like yeast multiplies at an extraordinary rate, doubling every half an hour or so - if you into bread making you know. Jesus had spent many hours nurturing faith and belief in his followers and he knew that unbelief would grow like a yeast in their fragile mentalities.

It seems that disciples are already deadened in their thinking because they say, “it is because we have no bread”

Hello? They think Jesus has got obsessed with bread-making ingredients because he is hungry?

He rebukes them sternly:

Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? **18**Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?

They just don’t get it, they don’t see, they don’t understand. What Jesus is saying is that there are two ways of looking at the world. You can either look at the surface of things or you can see what lies beneath. When you look at the surface, things don’t make sense, things don’t line up, everything seems random. When you look deeper you start to get a glimpse of another reality, another world of connection and meaning where God is at work.

Let’s take an example: why are there two similar miracles – feeding of the 5000 and 4000? In the first there were 12 baskets left over and in the second 7 baskets. Twelve represents Israel (12 tribes), whereas seven represents the Gentiles. In the 5000, the people had followed him from the Galilee area – they were all Jews. In the 4000, many people were from “ a far off” – a phrase often indicating people from outside the Jewish areas – i.e. Gentiles.

Beneath the surface there is a reason for two stories if you can see it: Jesus did one miracle for the Jews and one for the Gentiles – bringing his mission of abundant provision to the whole world. If you can see it!

So perhaps we need to take a look at ourselves and others to see what is really going on and what God is really up to.

To finish the story about the care home.

We started the service and the lady sat in her wheelchair quite grumpily but when we came to the memorial element of the service we invited people to light candles and I turned to her would *you* like to light one first? She looked at me intently for a second and then she said *yes*. So we pushed her wheelchair slowly towards the candles, lit a match, gave it to her and she reached out to light a tea-light. There was a moment of panic when she forgot to blow out the lighted match and nearly burnt her fingers, but we sorted it and I said to her who are you lighting it for? She said her 3rd grandchild who was stillborn. And she told me that her daughter never came to see her. So I said shall we say a prayer? She said yes and we prayed that she would renew contact with her daughter. And then she said thank you. Pam and Eileen were having some great conversations too.

On one level was a bunch of old people with various stages of dementia losing their inhibitions and making inappropriate comments. On another level God was working powerfully there in that service.

But we had to see it. We had to have our eyes open and see beneath the surface, to respond to what was really going on, not what appeared to be happening.

A few verses later we have the story of the blind man receiving his sight – which is clearly much more than a story of healing but an acted out miracle of faith – of seeing in a different way altogether.

And after another few verses in chapter 8, we have this :

**27**Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, ‘Who do people say I am?’

**28**They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’

**29**‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah.’

Finally the penny had dropped, the mind had clicked, the disciples had got it! They were starting to see what was really going on, who Jesus was, what God was doing all around them.

God is a gentleman. He doesn’t force, cajole, or compel. He sets out the clues in front of us and invites us to see the whole of the moon not just the crescent.

Will you?

Amen.