

Mark 6:30 – 34 & 53 – 56, July 2015.

In two weeks time, I hope, most of you will be joining us at the Victoria Room for breakfast where you might have a conversation about one of your heroes. Heroes are usually people who have done something we think of as extraordinary: a courageous action, or standing up for something they believe in. There are those we admire because of their artistic or sporting talents - never more so than at the moment with three motor racing grand prix in a row and some wonderful tennis - not to mention the world cup. Then there are those we enjoy listening to - who inspire us as teachers or orators. The second part of Mark Chapter 6 could have covered any of those ideas, but today we are just looking at the bread slices in another of Mark's sandwiches .. missing out the two enormous fillings of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. Yet they are not just plain bread, as we shall see.

It begins with this verse.. *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.* Jesus had sent the disciples out in twos to do his work and we know, from the other gospels, that they came back very excited. So they were all tired and needed some rest. They had been surrounded by people who were “*coming and going*” to the point that they did not even have time to eat. So Jesus took them to a quiet place to rest. But rest did not come. Like paparazzi hounding celebrities, the crowds ran ahead of them and were waiting for them when they arrived. So, having compassion on them, Jesus began to teach them. Then we skip the fillings to the end of the chapter, where Jesus, travelling by boat, landed at Gennesaret and was met again by a large crowd. They recognized him, and I suspect hundreds if not thousands of people began to carry their sick to him so that he might make them well. No actual miracles or specific healings are mentioned, so why choose this as the gospel reading, you might ask. Well, these two small passages tell us much about Jesus, his message and the people who followed him.

Have you thought about Jesus' ability to draw a crowd? I am not sure we always grasp the size of the crowds that followed him. We know that here he had an audience of well over five thousand people in a very short period of time. Remember this was not a time of Twitter or Facebook or texting or email or mobile phones. Word about Jesus spread simply by one person telling another, and in no time large crowds would gather to listen to his message. In the book “*The Jesus I never knew*” which we have been studying in our Ministry Team meetings, Philip Yancey says “*The Gospels present a man who has such charisma that people will sit three days straight, without food, just to hear his riveting words.*”

Jews and Gentiles alike heard something in the message of Jesus that was so compelling that they followed him on foot, walking or running mile after mile, going ahead of him, trying to figure out what his next move would be, wanting to get close to him to hear one more message he had for them. Perhaps some of you heard Billy Graham in his heyday, or have gathered what an influence he had on the Queen by watching the Netflix series *The Crown*. I saw him once, and his message was very good, but I did not need to see him again... when the speech was over, it was over. He was an evangelist, introducing people to Jesus so that they could be integrated into churches and supported with further teaching. The crowd that came to hear him didn't need to follow him to his next engagement. They didn't try to second guess where his next stop would be and to beat him there to get a good seat. But that is what people were doing after listening to Jesus. Over the years, there have been other people like that. Charles Simeon, an Anglican minister in Cambridge, outcast by his church due to his strange ways yet, by the time he died, it is estimated that one-third of all the Anglican ministers in the country had sat under his teaching at one time or another. According to the historian Thomas Macaulay, Simeon's “*authority and influence... extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, ... his real sway in the Church was far greater than that of any primate.*”

A more obvious choice would be John Wesley who believed that, Christians could achieve a state where the love of God "*reigned supreme in their hearts*", giving them outward holiness and enabling them to experience Jesus Christ personally. During his lifetime he was described as the best loved man in England. I have been inspired by others who I have started to follow, trying to hear them live or through their teachings on the internet. Soon after I became a Christian, I went to hear an American preacher and teacher called John Wimber. He was talking about the kingdom of heaven and how we can bring that on earth, not only through what we say but through what we do. This intrigued me so I found out when he was coming to the UK and tried to hear him every time, as his message brought the Bible alive. I was hungry to know more about Jesus and to be able to share the good news of the kingdom. So I understand the crowd wanting to keep listening to Jesus. He saw that they too were hungry and he had compassion on them because they were as sheep without a shepherd.

What does it mean, "*Sheep without a shepherd*"? It means that the people don't have a leader; they lack direction in their lives, they have lost their focus, and they are not sure of the meaning of life or their purpose in life ... they are anxious and bewildered. They are wandering aimlessly, not knowing what their next step should be. In Jeremiah 23 we heard how God criticised the leaders of Israel for being bad shepherds, for failing to care for the people. In response God promised that he would raise up good shepherds and a righteous king who would be their saviour. If you look at the context in Jeremiah you will see that King Jehoiakin is idolatrous, and the prophets and priests self-deluded and godless. Poor leaders gripped by false ideas usually have a terrible impact on their people. Imagine what it is like to be led by the militant leaders of Isis, recall the damage done by Nazism, or Pol Pot communism... or the racism of apartheid South Africa - or indeed the impact of secularism and consumerism on our own nation. But this is not the first time this phrase is used in the Bible. The phrase occurs first in the book of Numbers, as God instructs Moses to appoint Joshua to lead the Jewish people into the promised land, which was meant to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God. "*Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.*" People need leaders and, here in Mark, Jesus is fulfilling that prophecy, acting as the good shepherd that we know from John's gospel he understood himself to be: "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*"

And then in the final verse we learn "*wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*" We started with the disciples telling Jesus about the healings they had done and end with more that Jesus does. There is more healing that takes place in the lives of people who come to Jesus, as the Greek word to heal does not just mean physical healing but spiritual, emotional and mental healing as well... but that is another sermon for the Autumn.

So what about us? Who do we follow? Who is your hero? Who inspires us? Who is our leader? As Christians, our first response should be Jesus. Is he your shepherd? Are we hungry to listen to what he says and then go and imitate him? Do we think as he does? Is there someone we can learn from. It sounds as though Gareth Southgate has been a good shepherd to his squad in a way that some of his predecessors have not. We don't have John Wesley with us now, but is there some Christian teacher we can learn from like that? There are various theological books in this church that might interest you but you all have also been given a list of books and podcasts that might help to feed you. Let's have a moment of quiet while we reflect on who we follow.