

20 July 2024

Of One Being (Mark 6. 30-52)

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I've called this week's reflection 'Of One Being'. The phrase comes from the Nicene Creed, and the Nicene Creed is the church's attempt to articulate the essential mystery of Christian faith, the mystery of Jesus. He, so the Creed confesses, is 'of one being' with God and, at the same time, he is 'truly human'. The Creed doesn't explain how this can be or even what it means. It simply testifies that it's so. It seems to me the gospel reading we just heard does the same. On the one hand, it portrays Jesus as a human being relating to other human beings at the same level – teaching, being moved, sharing a meal, praying. On the other hand, because of what happens around him, because of what he effects in the world, he's depicted as manifesting an entirely different quality of being than we habitually find among us.

In fact, three times in this passage, Jesus is depicted being as God is. He is said to have 'had compassion for the crowd, because they were like sheep without a shepherd'. The Greek word for compassion here, *'esplagchnisthe'*, is used for the Hebrew *rahim* or 'womb'.¹ This is an image used in the Hebrew scripture to describe God's compassion, the compassion of a mother. Jesus is said to be moved as God is moved when he sees – drawing on another image from Hebrew scripture – that the people are like 'sheep without a shepherd', in need of what only God can give them.

Next he's said to feed the people in the wilderness. This is a clear reference to God's provision of manna in the desert to the people of Israel during their exodus from Egypt; though significantly, where (in the Hebrew narrative) the people were provided with only as much as they needed – no more and no less (Exodus 16. 17-18) – in this gospel story, Jesus is said to generate an abundance, twelve baskets full, the banquet of heaven.

¹ Bonnie Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001).

And finally, and most intriguingly, he's depicted as intending to pass by his disciples, as he walks towards them on water. At first, this episode looks a bit like the story of the calming of the storm which occurs earlier in this gospel. The disciples are out at sea, straining against an adverse wind, while Jesus proves himself once again master of the wind and waves, bringing order to chaos. But scholar David Neville has argued there's even more going on here.² He suggests that the key reference in this episode is to another part of the Exodus story in which Moses had said to God, 'Show me your glory, I pray'. God had replied to Moses, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord" [in Hebrew, YHWH, or 'I am' – from the verb 'to be']'. But, God continues, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33. 18-20). So Moses is told to stand on a rock and, says God, 'while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen' (Exodus 33. 22-23).

Compare our passage from the gospel. When Jesus walked on the sea towards his disciples 'He intended', says the text, 'to pass them by' (Mark 6. 48). When they saw him coming, his disciples cried out in fear, thinking him a ghost. Then Jesus proclaimed before them the name: 'Take heart, it is I' or (in the Greek) 'I am'. Surely this resonance is not accidental? Yet there's also an astonishing difference. Where the God who proclaims the divine name in the Exodus story must not be seen front on, lest his servant Moses perish at the sight of his face, in the gospel narrative, Jesus proclaims the divine name and then straightaway gets into the boat *with* his disciples. In him, it seems God *can be* met face to face. But the problem is, the disciples do not recognise him and cannot discern the meaning of what just happened. They were utterly astounded. And Mark connects their stupefaction with their general incomprehension about Jesus's identity. For neither did they 'understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened'.

² From lecture delivered at St Mark's National Theological Centre, 2007.

So – three times in this passage, Mark explicitly points to Jesus being ‘of one being’ with God. Our empirically minded culture tends to interpret the miracle stories as supposedly functioning to prove this claim – look at the loaves, look at the wind ceasing, he must be God. And then we get worried about whether or not these things ‘really’ happened and so whether they really do prove who Jesus is. But that’s not actually what Mark is doing. I’ve tried to show that these miracle stories are highly stylised, intentionally theological statements. They’re written from the perspective of someone who is already convinced that God is directly at work in Jesus and who is drawing on the symbolic resources of his tradition to communicate this conviction. In other words, for Mark, it’s not that the miracles prove that Jesus shares the being of God. Rather, he’s testifying that what became manifest in the world and in human relationships when Jesus was near was what you’d expect to happen when God is near. What happened in people’s experience of Jesus was unlooked for compassion, clarity of vision and abundant provision. What became manifest was a kind of sheer presence, a fullness of being, which was at the edge of his contemporaries’ capacity to behold but which nevertheless caused them peace and the inexplicable cessation of striving and anxiety. In his presence, they glimpsed and felt something of the pure grace and creativity of Life itself; true God of true God. *That’s* what they’re trying to tell us about.

And like an invitation and promise woven through these stories is the possibility that we too may become simple and still and silent enough to know this presence and participate in it. The whole sequence begins with Jesus inviting his disciples to ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’. This is not, as the text makes clear, to avoid engagement with the needs of the world, but to enable engagement to emerge from a truer place. Pope Francis has said: ‘only a heart that does not allow itself to be taken over by hastiness is capable of being

moved; that is, of not ... [being] caught up in itself and by things to do, [but] aware of others, of their wounds, their needs. *Compassion is born from contemplation*'.³

This is why, the Pope says, that each day, before anything else or – as in today's reading, at the end of the day's activities – Jesus would withdraw in prayer, in silence, in intimacy with God. Francis writes: 'If we learn to truly rest, we become capable of true compassion; if we cultivate a contemplative outlook, we will carry out our activities without that rapacious attitude of those who want to possess and consume everything; if we stay in touch with the Lord and do not anaesthetise the deepest part of ourselves, the things to do will not have the power to cause us to get winded or devour us. We need' – says the Pope – 'an "*ecology of the heart*", that is made up of rest, contemplation and compassion'.

This is the ecology we have been seeking to tend even more intentionally this month of Sabbath at Benedictus. It's an ecology, an attention, a capacity for presence that seems to me the necessary condition for any true and truly regenerative response to the chaos and anxiety, the grasping and sense of lack that threatens to overwhelm our world. So let us continue to entrust ourselves to this way and to the one who beckons us on it; let us open ourselves to his presence with us that we may become ever more as he is, a sign of and an access to the peaceable goodness at the heart of all things.

³ Pope Francis, 'Angelus', 18 July 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210718.html

