

6 The Wrong Kind of Yeast

Mark never lets his gospel divide into parts. Whenever you see a pattern, a group of two or three episodes that go together, or a section that seems to round off and come to a conclusion, you also find that they have a theme carrying them forward into the next episode, so that the story never stops. Mark would have been good at writing for Coronation Street or Neighbours.

The theme of feeding and eating goes forward into the next episode and for all the weity significance of the three incidents just related, the story moves on briskly. There is more to say.

They made another attempt to get away from the crowds. It hadn't worked when they crossed the lake, but Jesus still needed, and he knew his disciples needed, quiet time, to be together apart from pressures and noise and argument, and to reflect on what was happening. They went to the Phoenician region of Tyre, to be for a time where they were unknown and so could hope to move freely, unrecognised. But a pagan woman blew his cover.¹ How she knew him, we don't know; but she knew him, and she was desperate for help for her little daughter who was suffering from an alarming fit. The woman rushed to him, threw herself at his feet and begged him to save the girl. But Jesus' answer was hard: "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the house dogs." (When he had tried to minister to gentiles in the land of the Gadarene pig-herders, that had worked out, as we saw, disastrously.) But the woman had too much at stake to be offended, and her answer was quick: "You're right, Sir, but even the house dogs can scramble under the table for the scraps the children drop." Jesus healed her daughter.

Jesus had learnt that his mission was not to the gentiles. But the teacher who had told the scribes and the synagogue leaders to bend their most precious rules when the need stood clearly before them, learnt now that even this rule, the rule of his mission from God, was not final and absolute: the need of the gentiles themselves could break thru and demand the table-scraps. The kingdom of God was open to faith and faith could pass over its boundaries wherever it met them.

If the feeding in the wilderness had been pointing to an imminent closure: the kingdom of God arriving with Israel's renewal, the encounter with the Phoenician woman opens it all up again. Where will the gentiles be when the kingdom comes? What will be their share from the table?

There followed a time of busy movement. Jesus and his disciples went all the way thru Galilee and the Decapolis again, healing and performing such wonders that his reputation soared. There was a second time when the crowds gathered to him and had to be fed, and a second time he gave thanks to God for the little food there was and fed thousands with it. But as before, he then sent the crowds away and returned to his disciples.

¹Mark 7: 28 – 30

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One day they were travelling again by boat. The journey must have been arranged in a hurry, for the disciples had forgotten to bring any food. Maybe they were getting away from the Pharisees, who had challenged Jesus to give them a sign from heaven; or maybe they were on the run from Herod's men. Jesus, I suppose, had been thinking it all over, and realising that his own disciples, even the chosen twelve, were not immune to the illusions and vices of Herod or the Pharisees. Both Herod and the Pharisees, tho in different ways, were acting normally for people in power, and unless his disciples learnt a very different attitude, they could be acting in the same way. Jesus realised it wasn't just that the "bad guys" currently held power, but that even the "good guys" would come to act the same way if they ever came to power without a fundamental change of attitude. He warned them, speaking up suddenly from his own thoughts:

"Keep a look out; guard yourselves against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod."
(Mark 8:16)

"Yeast" reminded them of bread, and they supposed he was teasing them for forgetting to bring any. They just weren't with him. He was talking about the attitudes and assumptions tied up with social, political power, and the corruption engendered by power. Yeast was a fitting metaphor: yeast that corrupted fruit, the product of corrupted fruit, and yet, properly used, it turned heavy, lifeless dough into lively, edible bread. Jesus had to warn his disciples against the corrupt example of Israel's actual and would-be rulers, but they thought he was worried about the supplies!

What is it about the disciples? They are not emerging as the heros of the kingdom at all. They are not turning out to be the support that Jesus will need. They don't understand and they don't see. What they have seen they seem to have forgotten, or they just don't realise what it means. Hadn't they been with him when he fed five thousand with a few loaves and a couple of fish? Did they really think he was, or they should be, worried about how much or how little food they had brought with them? They just hadn't understood how completely and permanently they were in the hands of God, how far all Israel was in the hands of God. They could not break with the habit of thinking about their own needs, as if the first priority was to cover those.

This put them right on the way for following Herod or the Pharisees. The most self-indulgent luxury and the most manipulating tricks for control begin with concern for yourself, when people who have the opportunity to go beyond themselves, to lead and help others, are still thinking about their own needs. And that is where the disciples were. They possibly didn't even realise that there was an issue for them, for there were so many times when they didn't understand, as they hadn't understood when Jesus came to them that nite, across the lake.

What was it that the disciples failed to understand? It is sometimes thought that they failed to grasp the spiritual dimension of a kingdom which they still saw in material terms, but that's hardly an adequate interpretation for a dialogue that throws us sharply back to those stories of Herod and the Pharisees. It was something to do with power, and its exercise in this world and a temptation that lay ahed of them, Jesus' disciples.

And it wasn't that they didn't believe in Jesus. They followed him. They liked to listen to him. They were excited and enthused by what he had to say about the coming kingdom of God (I guess they couldn't wait for it to come.) They saw that he healed, and they themselves had exercised his power over demons. Clearly they believed in him and loved him. If personal faith in Jesus was enough, they had it all. But they did not have it all, and they did not understand.

They did not understand what had been shown in the wilderness, that the power and love of God that constitute the kingdom, God's rule over Israel, was already among them. They did not understand that Israel, the sheep without a shepherd for whom Jesus had been moved with pity, were looking for their leaders. They did not understand that when they had come across the lake to reflect in quiet solitude on the recent mission in Galilee, God had provided his own reflection and commentary, overturning both Jesus' and their plans. They had not understood that God's reflection on their work had been to move forward at once into the greater work of the kingdom, to bring to them and to Jesus the leaderless crowds, hungry for teaching and food and leadership, and that, in Jesus, God had confirmed his care for them, the beginning of the kingdom. Finally, they did not understand that in coming to them across the lake, after he had sent the people home, Jesus was affirming their role in the leadership of Israel, in the kingdom that had already opened upon them.

It was not that they failed to see some other-worldly reality behind the "symbolic" material events. They were failing to grasp what was happening to Israel, now, in this world, and to understand the work and the role God had given them in it. They could not think what might be the temptations of that role, for they hadn't yet understood what the role was or what the work of God into which they were being drawn. They failed to understand as Christians have failed to understand for centuries since, in which time there have been many Pharisees and many Herods in leadership among us.

And it would soon appear that they failed to understand the crisis that was gathering around them. They didn't understand the challenge that the kingdom represented to the very structure of society in their time or in any time – perhaps not as much as the Pharisees did.

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They travelled to the far north of Israelite country, to Caesarea Philippi, where a discussion between Jesus and the disciples turned on Jesus' own identity: What did people make of him? He asked his disciples what they had heard people saying. They had heard a number of ideas going round, but when Jesus asked them directly: "What about you? Who do you reckon I am?" Simon answered "You are the Messiah."

We will see in a later chapter how Matthew has a great deal more to say about this moment of insight, but Mark only says that Jesus told them to say nothing about it to anyone else. Talk about the Messiah was not part of his public message. Perhaps, as I said before, Jesus was thinking that "Messiah" could only have meaning in the context of the kingdom the Messiah was to rule, and if his own disciples didn't yet understand that kingdom, its presence and its power among them already, or the way it

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would be and the way it would be ruled, it was not time to be talking publicly of the Messiah who would rule it.

Jesus needed to open their eyes to the reality of the kingdom of God; that its beginning and its pattern were already appearing among them; that it wasn't going to come in the forms of pomp and power they might be expecting; that it would bring its demands on them. A time of glory was coming when the "Son of Man" (the triumphant ruler of God's kingdom at the end of time) would appear with the angels of heaven, but before that time the "Son of Man" (Jesus himself) would suffer, would be rejected by the leaders of Israel, and be put to death. This at least was no private warning for his disciples; he spoke openly about it to them and to the crowds. Bringing together his disciples and the people who were crowding to hear him, he gave them this stark message:

"If anyone wants to come with me, they must forgo themselves and take up their cross to follow me. If anyone aims to preserve their life they will lose it, but if anyone is willing to lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the good news, they will find they have saved it. What use is it to acquire the whole world, if in the process you lose your real life?"¹

In the starkest possible terms he had dismissed any hopes that the kingdom of God might elevate them to positions of power and profit such as either the Pharisees or the Herodians valued. They had all seen pitiful condemned men forced to carry their own scaffolding out to crucifixion, and here Jesus was telling them to step willingly into that role. People will suffer and die for the kingdom and they must be ready for that.

But the rule of God is coming and where God rules, there is always, ultimately, joy and glory. A few days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John, the chosen three of the chosen twelve, up a high mountain to a place where they were alone.² There Jesus was transformed before them. His clothes became a dazzling white, whiter than any washing powder on earth could make them. Moses and Elijah appeared with him and they were talking with him, for all the world like three colleagues. The three disciples were overwhelmed and afraid, but Peter, who it seems could never keep quiet, started saying: "This is a wonderful place for us to stay. Let's put up three shrines, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

But Peter had been brought there to hear, not to spell out his plans. A cloud came over them and a voice spoke to them from the cloud. "This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him." They were overwhelmed, and when the disciples recovered, there was only Jesus there, as ordinary as he always had been. He told them to tell no one about what they had seen until he had "risen from the dead".

"This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him."

The unforgettable testimony of God marks Jesus out as the Messiah, the Son of God. Yet how the Messiah? What kind of Messiah is he? If Jesus had appeared on a plain or in a town with the kings David and Solomon at his side talking to him, that would

¹ Mark 8: 36 ² Mark 9: 2 – 8

have been a very different message. But he had appeared with Moses and Elijah, the great founder and law-giver, and the great restorer of Israel, on a mountain, just as Moses' and Elijah's great moments in the history of Israel took place on the mountains of Horeb and Carmel.

The Son of God that Jesus was would not just restore to an already existing and broadly faithful Israel independence and power, peace and good government as David and Solomon had done. Rather, he would reconstitute Israel itself in its true law and lead it in God's way as Moses had done. He would recall Israel from its sins, from its rejection of God, from oppression and injustice as Elijah had done. Jesus as the Son of God or Messiah, would bring about a total revolution in Israel, the true founding of Israel that would establish in its fullness and its beauty the rule of the Law of God.

The dazzling revelation, the whole truth of Jesus, of who he is and what his commission from God, was not to break suddenly upon the whole of Israel, tho there were many among the people who believed in him. It was, for the present, something for his closest disciples alone. The coming kingdom of God somehow sought their faith, for them to believe, and to receive the word and the power of God, to go forward and to lead others forward in God's way.

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When they came down from the mountain¹ they found the rest of the twelve and a crowd of people dealing with some major trouble. A man had brought his son to the disciples, a desperate father desperately hoping for help. For his son was tormented by a demon. He was deaf and mute and he had suffered convulsions and sudden rigid fits ever since his childhood. Sometimes the violence of it had thrown him into the fire or into water. We mite call it epilepsy, and it was at a dangerous level.

The disciples had been trying to cast out the demon, but they were unable and the distraut father now turned to Jesus: "If you can do something, please take pity and help us." And Jesus replied: "What do you mean 'If you can'? Anyone who believes can do everything." In an agony the man cried out: "I do believe. Help that part of me that doesn't believe!" All the commotion was drawing an even bigger crowd, so Jesus put an end to the matter. He commanded the demon, which threw the boy into one final paroxysm, then left him, lying there as if dead. But Jesus reached out, took him by the hand and helped him up. He was restored.

In the face of evil, powerful evil, what can we do? We are helpless, and even faith in the power and goodness of God has trouble really relating that to the horrors and helplessness we find in our own world. The incident in Gadara, where "Legion" was the demon, reminded us that there was no great distance in people's experience between the helplessness of the weak under the power of the demons and the helplessness of ordinary, suffering people under the ruthless march of empire. Domination, whether psychological control by "spirits", or political and military control by imperial powers, crushes the human spirit and breaks their community.

¹ Mark 9: 14

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Both have the physical ability to destroy bodies and crush families to despair. Anyone who thinks psychology and politics are two different spheres doesn't know either of them.

We who think that all this about demons belongs to a superstitious past have lost the plot. And those who still confront, in the ministries of healing, the realities of demonic influence, often have rediscovered only half the story. For the demons we have to confront are also those political powers that reduce us, even those of us who believe, to helplessness, to wondering if God really can set us free, or set us free this side of death. The monolithic party that crushes the people with tanks; the economic and military superpower that sends in the marines or lends its resources to terrorists; the world banks that strangle hope and independence – who can go on believing that the liberating power of God prevails even against these and will not wait for another world and another history to confront and overthrow them?

Who can believe? The disciples of Jesus must learn to believe, and believe so confidently that they will encounter the world as Jesus does. Their role is vital, for the kingdom as it grows will call on such faith and call up such needs. When Jesus and his disciples had gone back home, they asked him: “Why weren't we able to cast out that demon?” Whether the three who went up the mountain had learnt what they needed to learn remains to be seen, but those who were left below had not been able to carry out their task. Why not?

We might expect Jesus' answer to be that they, like the boy's father, had lacked the necessary faith – but it is not. It is a puzzling answer: “This kind can only be cast out with prayer.”

What kind? And does he mean that all the other kinds don't require prayer? If Matthew or Luke had written this, we would have had a lot more to go on, for they have a lot more to say about prayer. Mark rarely mentions prayer, and then says little about it – but then again, that might make it all the clearer what Jesus means here. If I've recalled rightly, Mark mentions prayer only four times: that morning before Jesus left Capernaum to go preaching around the villages; on the mountain after he had fed the thousands in the wilderness; at this point; and at a terrible moment still to come when Jesus faces in Jerusalem the final crisis of his life. Prayer, in Mark's gospel, is Jesus' turning to God at those points when his way forward has to be decided, when his ministry has reached a turning or a new dimension is to be opened up. It is a profound recognition that the rule of God moves forward and is never closed or static. When we might think we have learnt our part in it, a new challenge opens up and we can only ask Godself what is our way to meet it and go with it.

“This kind” of spirit is not one particular type but any that throws up a new challenge, presenting the disciples with difficulties they had not previously encountered. Wherever we find that our experience and our success so far in the work of God is no longer adequate, then do we have to go to Godself, to ask for our way forward. Perhaps what was new in this challenge was the half-faith of the desperate father, but whatever it was, the disciples were not equal to it and they needed to pray.

They were learning. The coming kingdom of God was making demands of them and in those demands they were growing. With Jesus to explain what was happening,

they might yet be fit to proclaim the rule of God throughout Israel. They might yet learn to liberate, nourish and serve the people under the rule of God.

But their way forward was not guaranteed. With liberation and service would come the opportunities of power. They had still to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.