

Home Study

Mark's Epiphany



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever read the Herman Melville classic, Moby Dick? Or seen a movie version of this literary gem? When some people read Moby Dick, they are confronted with the inscrutability of God and they end up wrestling with the relationship between free will and fate. Other people just slog through a story about a boat and a whale.

In our reading today from Mark's Gospel, the disciples are definitely in the second group. They fail to grasp what they've just experienced.

TODAY'S READING

Read through Mark 8:14-21, and make note of what catches your attention or surprises you.

Mark sets the stage for us. The disciples had just witnessed Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people, for the second time. Now Jesus and the disciples were sailing around with one measly loaf of bread in the boat, and they had forgotten to bring more.

Knowing what Jesus had just done miraculously, do you think that the disciples should have been concerned about how little bread they had? Why or why not?

Read again Jesus' words of caution in verse 15.

Now the disciples are really worried. It is not clear exactly what they thought Jesus meant, but it sparks a conversation about the low rations. The disciples are so concerned with their perceived problem that Jesus' warning goes right by them. Can you think of things in your life that cause so much stress and anxiety that it can be difficult to engage with God's Word?

Jesus is not impressed with his disciples. He intended one warning, but sees that he needs to solve a different problem before he can address the one he wanted to.

Read again verses 17-19.

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Most likely, there was some blushing going on now among the disciples, and they were probably avoiding making eye contact with the Lord. With his questions, Jesus is reminding the disciples what they've already witnessed. The point is clear: You know that I can make food whenever we need it, so why are you worried about bread?

How often are we like the disciples? Each of us has seen God's work in our lives. Through the Gospel we know the work that he has already done, and we see that work continued in the Sacraments. We also have moments in our lives when we see God providing in unexpected ways; and, yet, with every new challenge, we respond with panic and anxiety.

One way to put off the "sky is falling" feeling is to remember the ways that God has taken care of you in the past. Psalm 105 recounts the saving works of God, in forty-five beautiful verses. Take time to read this psalm today, or whenever you need a reminder about the work God's already done. This psalm, and a similar list of God's works in your own life, can be useful tools for directing us back to God in difficult situations.

Just like Moby Dick is not really about a whale, Jesus' warning about leaven was not just about bread. The disciples didn't catch it, but with the benefit of hindsight, we can.

So, what do you think Jesus meant when he warned the disciples about "the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod?" Check out Matthew's account of this same story (Matthew 16:5-12) for some help with your answer, especially verse 12.

The leaven that Jesus warned the disciples about was the teachings and values of these religious and political leaders. Each of these parties was dangerous, for different reasons. The Pharisees over-emphasized ritual cleanliness while neglecting laws about morality (see Jesus' colorful expression about them in Matthew 23:24). King Herod, on the other hand, was willing to use any force necessary to continue his rule and establish his kingdom.

Why does Jesus use the metaphor of leaven in his initial warning to the disciples (verse 15 of today's reading)? Bakers know that it takes very little leaven, or yeast, to make the entire dough rise. This metaphor strengthens his warning. Jesus wants his followers to know that even a little legalism, or even a little lust for power and earthly reward, is dangerous to the soul of the disciple.

How does Jesus' warning apply to these modern-day discipleship situations?

- Christians who legalistically demand sinners to clean up their lives before they become Christians
- Christians who hold some sins to be very wicked while tolerating others
- Christians who are tempted to spend their lives fighting for earthly power (anxious striving for money, militant allegiance to a political party, etc.)

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- Christians who allow even a small bit of greed or nationalism to seep into their faith and distract them from walking in faith with God
- Christians who allow worldly stresses and concerns (which are not sinful, in and of themselves) to become an idol in their life

Jesus came to save sinners. He came for people concerned with all the wrong things, and for people concerned with the right things but going about it all the wrong way. This includes the apostles; and this includes us, too.

Thanks be to Jesus for his willingness to give his life to reconcile us back to God. Thanks be to God for the patience that he shows us even after conversion. Thanks be to the Holy Spirit, who strengthens our faith in Jesus and releases our grip from the idols we hold dear.

PRAYER

Jesus, there are many things in my/our lives that distract us from you. Please let me/we use these distractions as an opportunity to look to you in faith, trusting that you will continue to provide my/our daily bread and that in the end you will provide abundantly in your kingdom. Let your reign be manifest in my/our lives and let your kingdom come in its fullness quickly. Amen.