

THE KINGDOM OF GOD, AS TAUGHT by Jesus, has some surprising characteristics. It is not going to come by political conquest or force; it has elements of secrecy and slow hidden growth. At the same time, something about it is to be openly disclosed (vv. 22-23).

There is also a hint that some will be inside it, and some outside. There will be those like the bad soils, who either never listen at all (v. 15) or do not take

it seriously (vv. 16-19); or those whose ears are closed, who will hear but never understand (v. 12). It is as if Jesus is saying that the kingdom is there for those who want it; but there will be those who will turn away.

The kingdom is certainly coming, says Jesus. It is inevitable, as surely as reaping follows sowing. We therefore need to get ready for it—urgently—if we are to be part of God's future.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- What does the gospel of Jesus say to our world that is filled with hopes and dreams for a better future?
- Why will some not listen? What is it about the kingdom that they will not like?
- What might keep you from the kingdom? How can you prevent it?

» Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for making available to us, through Jesus, the kingdom that so many longed for in Old Testament times.
- Ask God to help you to understand the importance of the kingdom and to put aside the things that might distract you from it.

» STUDY 4

THE SHEEP AND THEIR SHEPHERDS

[MARK 4:35-7:8]

ONE OF THE REMARKABLE BENEFITS of democracy is that it allows us to remove our political leaders regularly. We don't have to resort to civil war or royal beheadings. All it takes is a nice, orderly election, which is arranged for us by the political leaders themselves every few years.

It is curious that we feel the need for this constant changeover of leadership. Surely, on a purely practical level, it would make more sense for the leadership to be long term, to have time to consolidate, to plan for the future and effect some real change. It seems, however, that we have an innate distrust of our leaders. Perhaps this is because they so regularly let us down. They do not keep their promises; they appear to act selfishly and not in the best interest of the country; indeed, we have political leaders these days who openly state that they lie as a matter of course.

It is not only a modern problem.

Human leaders, whether political, religious or social, have a sad history of corruption, failure, neglect and self-interest. It was no different in the Israel of Jesus' time but it was much more serious. Israel's leaders had a special mandate from God to look after his chosen people. Their failure, and its contrast with Jesus' true leadership, is the focus of this study.

Before we begin, a word of explanation about the next few studies. In this study and the next two, we will look at the large middle section of Mark that runs from chapter 4 verse 35 right through to the end of chapter 10. It's a little hard to divide these chapters up neatly into chunks for study, because the episodes are all so interconnected, and gain much of their meaning from their relation to one another. In order to get some feel for this, the passages we will read in this study and the next two will overlap with one another somewhat.

Calming the storm

Psalms 107:23-32 provides some important Old Testament background to this part of the story. The verses tell the story of a group of sailors going to sea on their ships and experiencing a massive storm. The storm, we are told, is one of the deeds of the Lord. It has come about because he commanded it. When the sailors are confronted by the storm they cry out to God as their only hope and he graciously stills the waters: "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps 107:28-29).

Jesus the powerful shepherd

Read Mark 4:35-41.

1. What does the episode show us about Jesus' strength and authority?
2. Why are the disciples afraid?

Read Mark 5:1-20.

3. In the description of the man, what is emphasized?
4. Look back at Mark 3:23-27 where Jesus answers the accusation that he himself is possessed by Satan. In light of this, what have we learnt about Jesus from his encounter with the demoniac?

5. What does Jesus ask the man to do and what does he actually do in verses 19-20? What is implied about Jesus?

Jesus crosses back over the sea and is again confronted by a group of people who are suffering from the physical effects of the fallen world. Again we see Jesus' strength.

Read Mark 5:21-43.

6. Jairus is a synagogue ruler, one of the religious leaders of his people, yet he is powerless to save his daughter. What does he expect from Jesus? What does he get?
7. The woman with bleeding was also powerless, and beyond the help of anyone else. What response does Jesus commend her for?

Read Mark 6:1-6.

8. What is so strange about the response in Nazareth?

Ezekiel 34

It is always worthwhile to read the Bible for ourselves and not just accept someone else's word about what it says. There is a short study on Ezekiel 34 in the appendix (pp. 81-82) that will help you to work through that chapter for yourself at another time.

Another true shepherd

Numbers 27:15-18 records another Old Testament promise about God giving his people a true Shepherd. In this passage, Moses is told to lay his hands on Joshua and commission him as the new leader of Israel so that the people will not be "sheep without a shepherd". Given that 'Joshua' is simply the Hebrew form of 'Jesus', what do you think is being said about Jesus in Mark 6?

9. What are the reasons for the people's response?

Israel's failed shepherds

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THESE demonstrations of Jesus' strength, we have passages telling us about Israel's official leadership—first Herod (in 6:14-29) and then the Pharisees (in 7:1-16). Sandwiched in between these two passages about Israel's leaders is an example of the power and compassion of Jesus—the true and faithful Shepherd of Israel (6:30-57). Mark often uses this sort of device in his Gospel (and we will see more of it in the coming chapters). He links together different incidents in order to make a point. He sets up contrasts and comparisons, sometimes between Jesus and the religious authorities, and sometimes between the disciples and other people who are responding to Jesus.

Lying very prominently in the background to this whole section is the prophecy of **Ezekiel 34**. In it, God declares his judgement on Israel's leaders of the day whose job was to care for the flock of Israel. They should have fed and cared for the sheep, but instead they fed themselves on the sheep and clothed themselves in the wool. God's anger towards the failed leaders is fierce.

In the same section, God promises that he will not let his sheep be treated in this way. He tells the people that he, himself, will come and be their **true shepherd** (Ezek 34:11-16). As the chapter progresses God says that he will rightly judge his sheep and set his servant David over them as the true shepherd (Ezek 34:23-24). It is important to keep these ideas in mind as we work through the next section.

Read Mark 6:14-29.

10. Is Herod an attractive or an unattractive character? What are his strengths and weaknesses?

11. What threat does Herod pose for Jesus' mission?

12. How is Jesus being contrasted with Herod? What does Jesus do that Herod doesn't do?

Read Mark 7:1-8.

13. What problem does Jesus expose in Israel's leaders?

14. Why are the leaders hard-hearted?

15. Overall, what is Jesus' assessment of Israel's leadership?

IN EZEKIEL 34, GOD PROMISED TO come to his people, to search for the lost, to gather the strays, and to feed them. He also promised to send another 'David', another great shepherd-king who would care for his people.

Who then is Jesus? He is clearly portrayed in these chapters as God's

alternative to the corrupt leadership of Israel. He is the one who has compassion on the scattered sheep. But is he the Lord who has come to gather his people? Or is he the 'David', the Messiah, come to be their prince? Or is he perhaps both?

To this we turn in our next study.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- What makes a leader worth following?

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- What makes Jesus a leader worth following?

- What is the proper response to him?

- Why don't some people respond in that way?

» Give thanks and pray

- Give specific thanks to God for the many ways in which Jesus is a true leader and shepherd.
 - Pray for the leaders in your part of the world that God might give them eyes to see the true shepherd and so be transformed to lead your country well.
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