

The King who gives everything

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Preacher: Rupert Evans

[0 : 00] And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to Jesus a blind man and begged him to touch him. They took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village.

And when he had spat on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, Do you see anything? And he looked up and said, I see men, but they look like trees walking.

Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes. His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And he sent him to his home, saying, Do not even enter the village.

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others, one of the prophets.

And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ. And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

[1 : 03] And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed. And after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he would be Peter, and said, Get behind me, Satan.

For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. Now we're even in an age of confusion, don't we? Here's what one leading American psychologist has recently written. Mass shootings. Skyrocketing rates of depression and anxiety. Dramatic increases in global terrorism. Uncertain economic patterns.

Deep-seated culture wars. A broken political system. Damaging social media. Our time is more and more an age of turmoil, distrust, uncertainty, and perhaps genuine breakdown.

[2 : 05] It's no surprise that more than two-thirds believe we're headed in the wrong direction. Not since the 1960s have we seen so much political unrest, conflict, and unpredictability.

The worldviews and national identities that have defined us in the past are fraying. The unrest in our modern times is one of profound existential confusion.

Political confusion. Moral confusion. And even gender confusion characterize our age. For good or ill, our world is changing rapidly, and it can leave us feeling bewildered.

Old givens can no longer be assumed when it comes to things like family love and free speech. And perhaps especially faith. For example, back in 2001, 72% of the UK population described themselves as Christians on their census forms.

But ten years later, at the most recent census in 2011, that number has shrunk to just 59%. A quarter of people described themselves as having no religion at all. And 177,000, you may remember, described their religion as Jedi.

[3 : 14] All right. Old certainties have its time to be replaced by widespread confusion. And what we're inviting you to do at this week of talks, which we're putting on at Grace Church tonight, and then on a Sunday morning for those who'd like to come back to hear more, is to invite you to have a second look at the Christian faith.

To get clarity where perhaps there's confusion by examining Jesus afresh. That's why we call this week Jesus Re-Examined. And I want us to do that by going right back to basics for one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, and to see what Jesus himself says about his identity and importance.

We're going to look together at Mark chapter 8, where we meet two confused men, whose confusion turns to clarity as they interact with Jesus. With one man serving, we'll see, as a picture of the other.

And my hope is that Jesus' encounters with these men will give us clarity also, as they teach us two things he says we must grant to come to a true understanding of who he is.

Here's the first of those two things that I want us to think about this evening. Jesus is a matchless ruler. Jesus is a matchless ruler. The scale of contemporary confusion that exists when it comes to matters of faith is evidenced by the fact that although 59% of people at the last census identified as Christians, only 30% of Britons surveyed in the Comres poll last year believed Jesus to be the Son of God.

[4 : 48] The same poll found that 40% believed him to be a prophet or significant religious figure, and 18% just a normal human being. And a similar spectrum of views could be found in Jesus' own day.

How would it now admit verse 27 of our Bible passage that we read? Verse 27 we're told. Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, who do people say I am?

And they told him John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets. There was a range of opinions. And then Jesus gets more personal and asks the question that I guess each of us needs to answer.

Verse 29, look on. And he asked the disciples, but who do you say I am? Peter asked him, you are the Christ.

It's hard, I think, for us to get our heads around the magnitude of this, to grasp just what a huge moment it is. Because you see, faithful Jews like these disciples have been waiting centuries for the Christ or Messiah to arrive.

[6 : 05] The Old Testament have promised that one day God would send a king into the world who would rule over all people for all time. A perfect, just, and wise king who'd right every wrong and undo all the turmoil and tragedy we see in our world.

Many of those prophecies will, I guess, be familiar to us from the readings of Christmas carol services. The Jews have been waiting for the Christ for hundreds of years, and now, according to Peter, he was here in the person of Jesus.

We'd love you to take away these copies of Mark's Gospel afterwards. In my experience, many people haven't ever read in full one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. So why not take one and read through the first eight chapters of Mark's Gospel to this point and see what it was that caused Peter and the other disciples to come to this landmark conclusion about Jesus.

It's not hard to see why they did so. Because in the preceding chapters, Mark describes a man with staggering authority.

A man who could calm storms for the world and cure sickness in an instant. Who could restore the debt and raise the debt. Who had authority over wickedness and the weather.

[7 : 23] And so Peter reaches the only reasonable conclusion he could have. Jesus is the long-awaited Christ. Now that word, Christ, really means king.

But Peter's pronouncement here was far more than just a coronation of an ordinary ancient ruler. It was famously said that the sun never set on the British Empire in the days of Queen Victoria. And yet, when asked what should he do if he met Jesus, Queen Victoria said she'd take off her crown and lay it at his feet. She recognised Jesus was a king whose dominion extended far beyond even hers.

The Christ, the one whose rule extends over all. But Peter, she recognised Jesus as a matchless ruler. Napoleon was another of the most powerful rulers of modern times.

And yet he said this about Jesus in comparison to the giants of history. He said, I know men, and I tell you, Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world, there is no possible term of comparison.

[8 : 35] He also understood Jesus to be a matchless ruler. He went on. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius?

On force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love. And at this hour, millions would die for him. I search in vain history to find similar to Jesus Christ.

He said. You see, Napoleon recognised not only Jesus' matchless authority compared with every other ruler, but also his incomparable character. The last year has reminded us how easily power can be used to manipulate or frighten or control others.

Whether in Hollywood, Westminster, or the overseas aid sector. Power so often leads to corruption and oppression. But Jesus stands apart from the bullies and tyrants of this world.

And that he uses his power for good. We see that even in our passage, don't we? The healing of the blind man. So can I very gently ask each of us the question that Jesus asks here?

[9 : 51] Who do we? Who do you say Jesus is? If that's a question that you're conscious and you've never properly looked into, can I recommend the Christian Explores course that we run at Grace Church, where you can look again at the basics of the Christian faith in a relaxed setting?

There's no more important question. Because the claim here is that Jesus is someone with supreme authority. Someone who, because he's none other than the creator, is also the ruler over our lives.

Someone who's good and loving rule, we need to acknowledge personally, like Queen Victoria. Because it's just not possible, or it shouldn't be possible, to call yourself a Christian, as 59% of Britain still do.

And yet not also acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, as only 30% do. Peter reached the only conclusion he could. He recognised Jesus as a matchless ruler.

His ruler. Well, after correctly answering Jesus' question in verse 29, Peter must have thought he'd jumped straight to the top of the class.

[11 : 04] But pride comes before a fall. And within a few verses, he's sent away with his tail between his legs for remedial lessons. Let's look at the story in verse 31. Have a look down.

We're told, And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be healed, and after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, Now there are two things that we Brits are not supposed to talk about in polite company.

Religion and politics. And as I'm spending my time this evening talking about the first of those, I'm very nervous about venturing on to the second. But, when it comes to Brexit, the negotiations between the government and the EU have come in two stages, haven't they?

First there was the terms of the so-called divorce settlement, which was originally agreed back in December. And then there's the question of the future partnership between the two sides, and a trade deal which has been negotiated at the moment.

[12 : 21] And both parties have stated that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. In other words, you can't have one without the other. Both stages must succeed for a successful resolution.

And as Jesus sets out his terms for what it means to be one of his followers here in Mark 8, we discover that there are also two issues which must be resolved, both of which are essential.

Because, you see, it's not possible properly to understand who Jesus is if we haven't also understood why he came, that this matchless ruler came to be a selfless rescuer.

And that's the second lesson Jesus teaches Peter and us in these verses. Jesus is a matchless ruler, and Jesus is a selfless rescuer. And together, I think, these two things explain that perplexing miracle in two acts with which our reading began.

We said at the beginning that this part of Mark hinges upon Jesus' encounters with two people. The second of those people is Peter, who goes from getting an A star at GCSE Theology in verse 29 to failing his A levels in verse 33.

[13 : 37] But before Jesus' conversations with Peter were told of his encounter with this blind man in verses 22 to 26. And on first reading, it's a very odd miracle, isn't it?

Did you notice how Jesus seems to require two attempts to heal the blind man? He receives his sight in two stages. Just have a look with me at verse 22.

Mark tells us, And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to Jesus a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. And when he had spat on his eyes and laid his hand on him, he asked him, Do you see anything?

And he looked up and said, I see men, but they look like trees walking. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes. His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

See how the blind man is still confused after Jesus first lays hands on him. There's progress, but he can only see partially. So what's going on here?

[14 : 43] What's the Jesus who just walked on water and created enough food, but 5,000 people to eat, suddenly unable to heal this blind man properly? But he'd forgotten how to do it.

But his power deserted him. Well, not at all. You see, Mark records his miracle here as a visual aid of the disciples' spiritual condition at this time.

Time and again, in this part of his gospel, he portrays them as being blind. Spiritually blind. Just at the back, one example, to verse 18 of chapter 8, just before that passage.

Verse 18. Having eyes, do you not see? He asked them. The disciples were blind to the reality of who Jesus really is and to why he had come.

Up to this point, they'd still been totally in the dark, unable to see who he is. And so this blind man, whose account is sandwiched between Jesus diagnosing the disciples' blindness in verse 18 and Jesus' two conversations with Peter in verses 28 to 33, serves as an illustration of Peter and the disciples as a whole.

[15 : 52] Because just as this blind man was unable to see physically in two stages, so Jesus' teaching spiritual understanding for the disciples would also occur in two acts.

The blind man's confusion after Jesus first laid hands on him corresponds to the disciples' confusion after verse 30, when they still only had partial clarity.

You see, yes, the disciples have now grasped who Jesus is, the matchless ruler. But they can't yet see clearly or fully because they haven't grasped the second thing they need to understand.

The purpose of Jesus' coming. Indeed, Peter strongly objects to what Jesus has to say about this and has to be rebuked in verse 33.

It's, I think, why in verse 30 Jesus didn't yet want Peter to go reporting to others what he discovered about Jesus' identity because he wasn't ready for that. He passed his theory test, if you'd like, but not the driving test.

[16 : 57] It wasn't safe for him to get in the car yet because he had no idea what direction it was going in. And the direction it was going in was very surprising.

Because in verse 31, Jesus, this matchless ruler, moves on to the second stage or talks, as it were. We're told he begins to teach him something new. And to the disciples' shock, he announces that he's going to Darwin.

The last thing you'd expect a mighty ruler to say when laying out his manifesto, then look at me at verse 31 once more. We're told Jesus began to teach him that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.

And after three days, rise again. We saw earlier how Napoleon listed Alexander the Great amongst the giants of history. And the story is told of how Alexander once ordered some of his soldiers to march off a cliff as a demonstration of his people's commitment to him.

The soldiers dutifully aband and plummeted to their deaths. It's a gruesome, ugly picture of power, isn't it? It's a mighty ruler using his authority to send others to their deaths.

[18 : 24] But here we see that Jesus Christ is no ordinary ruler because in contrast, he laid down his own life for his people. He willingly marched into Jerusalem to suffer death and salve in order to demonstrate his commitment to them.

Just three weeks ago, 19-year-old Nicholas Cruz shot dead 17 people at a high school in Parkland, Florida. All of us would have seen the coverage on the news, I guess.

It was a terrible tragedy, but the death toll would have been even worse if it wasn't for the sacrificial heroism of a man called Aaron Feist. CNN reported how football coach Aaron Feist threw himself in front of students as bullets hailed down.

He suffered gunshot wounds from which he later died. The school spokeswoman said afterwards that Aaron Feist died the same way he lived. He put himself second.

He died the hero. Well, the reason Jesus went to the cross was also to give his life to save others.

[19 : 33] He came to be a selfless rescuer. He put himself second and sacrificed his life to rescue you and me. See, the reality is that none of us lives consistently with Jesus in charge of our lives.

Live our own way instead, pushing God to the margins of our lives at best, thinking we know better as Peter does here. And the Bible says we're actually facing God's rightful judgment as a result.

God. It's a serious thing to reject our ruler. But in his great love, Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty we deserve for we might be rescued.

He threw himself in the way of God's just punishment to save us from it. Why Jesus says he must suffer in verse 31. It's the only way we can be forgiven.

He is a selfless rescuer. Another recent opinion poll from Ipsos Mori asked people to describe what being a Christian meant to them personally.

[20 : 43] They were given various options and 40% chose the answer, I try to be a good person. But Jesus' explanation of his mission here reminds us that the Christian faith isn't a call to be good.

It's not about rules, but a rescue. about mercy, not merit or morality. None of us can be good enough for a holy God.

But Jesus has made forgiveness possible. I guess those 40% of people surveyed who thought Christianity is simply about being good are a bit like Peter here.

They've understood who Jesus is. I guess these were people who call themselves Christians. Christians, but they not Christ why he came, that he needed to die so they could be forgiven, because we all failed in our attempts to be good.

They only see partially like the blind man after stage one of his healing. It's very easy, I think, to be like them, isn't it? To make the same mistake as Peter, to accept Jesus as the matchless ruler and yet object to his mission as the selfless rescuer.

[21 : 58] We need to accept our needs for Jesus' rescue as well as acknowledge Jesus' rule. It seems Peter was probably so animated here because he wanted Jesus to be an earthly king who'd liberate Israel from Roman occupation for what he assumes that Christ would come to do.

And we also can easily want Jesus to have an earthly agenda, one that suits our agenda perhaps. It has to be someone who's come primarily to bring liberation from injustice in this world or from our own struggles and difficulties.

But Jesus rebukes Peter for having too small a view of his mission because he came to do something far more important actually than Peter had imagined, to meet a far greater need common to us all, this need for a rescue from God's future judgment at the cost of his life.

So as we close, how can we have certainty and clarity in an age of spiritual confusion? Well notice how the blind man can see everything clearly at the end of verse 25 after Jesus had laid hands on him a second time.

And if we understand both of Jesus' two lessons here, that he's not only the matchless ruler but also the selfless rescuer, we have spiritual sight and understanding and know the wonderful rescue that he's come to bring.

[23 : 33] Amen. Amen. Amen.