

Who Cares?

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[0 : 00] So now Mark 4, 35 to 41, this is the second bite of the cherry. If you're new with us, we actually looked at this passage last week and we move so quickly through these amazing incidents in the life of Jesus.

I often feel like a clumsy thief who goes into a jewelry store and just picks up what's on the counter and leaves all the treasures untouched. What an amazing incident it is.

It's the middle of the night. The wind comes with hurricane fury. The waves rise over the boat.

These big, burly, professional fishermen bailing for hours.

The boat is filling. It's on the point of sinking and they're about to go down to a violent and watery death. And Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat. So there's no gentleness in their question when they say to him, Teacher, don't you care that we are dying?

And Jesus wakes and he does something no human has ever done before, no human has ever done since. He speaks to the wind and to the waves and he says, Shut up, stay shut.

[1 : 09] I've been in Canada a long time. I'm not sure I've ever heard someone say that in polite company. And although I do see posters around the city, there's a young woman from Vancouver who's made a hit with a song called Shut Up and Dance.

Does anybody know that? Has anybody seen that? Thank you for admitting that. There was no one at nine who would admit it.

However, as soon as Jesus says it, the wind stops and the sea is glassy, smooth. And the twelve apostles in the boat who are a moment before were terrified of dying and they are much more afraid.

Now their fear of death has been replaced by something so much larger, vast. They look at Jesus and they see there's someone here who is larger than death itself.

In Jesus they're confronted not with just a teacher who can heal, but someone who has the power of God over creation, sheer, majestic, sovereign power to still the storm.

[2 : 22] And remember last week we saw it exposed, the chasm that exists between God and us. But we have to acknowledge, don't we, that I think this sort of story makes some of us deeply uncomfortable.

We're suspicious of displays of power. Power has been so much badly used and abused.

We're sceptical and we're resistant of individuals and of institutions that make big power claims. I think the current anti-bullying campaign is trying to get exactly at this.

And you may find the display of Jesus' power just taken on its own more alarming than comforting.

And if you feel this way, stay with us because I want, what I want to do is I want to place this story back into its context because there are people who have been ripping this incident out of context in all sorts of ways.

Let me give you another illustration. There are some Christian, very sincere Christian leaders who think this is what the church ought to be doing today. We have Jesus.

[3 : 34] He's still alive. We have Jesus with us. Preaching and Bible studies and loving one another, that's not enough. Preaching is never going to make the neighbours sit up and take notice.

What we need is some stilling of the storms. We need some major miracles. And the only reason we don't have these major miracles is our faith is insufficient. Your faith is insufficient.

You see where it goes? What happens when we put this back in its context? We see how different Jesus' power is from every human power.

In fact, Jesus' power presents us with a paradox. Because if you read to the end of the gospel, you'll find Jesus never uses his power to oppress people or to justify himself.

He does the opposite. He chooses to become the outcast. He chooses to suffer, become the victim. And what's amazing is that this one, who by his word can calm the wind and the ocean, chooses to give his life to serve us.

[4 : 43] And that, in gospel terms, is a greater demonstration of power. See, here is the paradox with the power of Jesus and the power of God.

It's not seen so much in spectacular display, or not seen only in spectacular display. It is seen in a man bleeding to death on the cross, sacrificing his life in love for us.

So when we put this story back into its context, we find that the great display of power is not here so much in chapter 4, where he commands nature, although that is his power.

It's shown when he chooses to die, naked, unjustly condemned, on a cross. And this is God's way with us. And it's very hard to grasp.

God doesn't just overwhelm and oppress. God uses his power in suffering and weakness to liberate through serving. And that's why I wanted to come back to this passage for a second week.

[5 : 47] I want us to look more deeply at the paradox of power in Jesus and see how it applies to us now. Because the passage takes us in two directions.

It takes us deeper into the paradox of power and then wider. And when it takes us deeper, it shows us how the paradox of Jesus' power applies to our faith today.

And when it goes wider, it shows how it impacts the growth of the kingdom within our lives and within the world. So let's look at those two things separately.

Firstly, how does the paradox of Jesus' power impact our faith? How do we go deeper into this?

Remember last week we saw there were three little questions in the passage?

Today I want to just dwell on the middle question. Because as soon as Jesus calms the wind and the wave, he rounds on the apostles and he says to them, Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?

[6 : 48] Now those are pretty strong words. I mean, just think about it. Jesus was the one, it was Jesus' idea to go across the lake in the first place. These are seasoned professionals.

They've been battling the storm all night. Try as they will, the boat is about to go under. I think their terror is understandable. They've only been with Jesus for a short time.

Their eyes are starting to open. They don't really understand he's the Son of God and the Messiah until chapter 8. Surely Jesus ought to be more gentle with them. Don't you think? More encouraging.

More positive. Seems a bit stiff, doesn't it? Why does he do this? And I think part of the reason he says this so strongly is because of their question, their first question in verse 38.

Don't you care that we're drowning? Jesus seems like he's uninvolved. He's asleep. And as things get harder and harder, he seems to be doing nothing.

[7 : 57] And so they do what I do and what you do so often. They begin to doubt his care and his concern and his capacity and they want him to start bailing lest he be completely useless and they drown.

I think this is what Jesus is rebuking. It's not hard to trust Jesus when he acts with great power and stills the storm.

It's not difficult to put your trust in God when he answers our prayers and drives back the waves.

The problem for us is when Jesus seems to be asleep.

And we pray and we pray and we pray and the waves get bigger and the wind gets stronger and cuts through us to the bone. And it seems like heaven won't answer and apparently Jesus seems to be asleep to our needs.

But here is the paradox of the power of Jesus. It is at that moment that his power is at work. It is exactly at this point that we know whether our faith is real or not.

[9 : 03] So it's one thing to trust him when everything's smooth sailing and there's no, you know, life is calm, everything's going your way. But we only know we truly trust him when it appears that he's not acting for us.

The disciples are in a crisis. Their lives are at risk. But as Jesus turns on them, Jesus shows them there's a deeper crisis.

He wants them to trust him. He wants them to have a faith in him that goes beyond death. See? He doesn't just want us to trust him that he can rescue us from death, but through death and beyond death.

This is what it means for us and for our faith today, you see. Jesus has promised to be with us. And sometimes he rescues us from death and sometimes he does not, as he didn't with Jesus. But he always promises to rescue us through death and beyond death. That's what Christian faith is about. So later on in the New Testament, when the Apostle Paul is caught in a storm at sea, what does he do?

[10:19] He prays with the rest of the boat. He doesn't stand up and wave his arms and try and command the storm to die down. He trusts God. He calls on the sailors to trust God. And you know what happens? The ship sinks.

We have, we at St. John's, I've been your pastor for many years now. And we have seen God answer our prayers in some of the most remarkable ways.

When the waves have come and the wind has blown and we've called out to him and he has answered so obviously beyond what we needed. And when that happens, our singing becomes more robust and it's not so challenging for us to have faith at those times.

But when the storms come and we're under great pressure and we call out and nothing seems to happen. And the wind continues to blow and the waves go beyond the limit of what we think we can bear and we call out.

And Jesus doesn't answer, what then? Has Jesus lost his power? You know, has it diminished? Are our prayers not good enough?

[11:28] Does he not see how hard this is? What is he doing? It's at these moments Jesus is calling on us to trust him. I think of two men in our congregation who came to a time of great testing in their lives.

They received terminal diagnoses. Many of us were praying for them and it seemed obvious what God ought to do. But things got worse and worse and finally both of them died.

But as they died, their faith didn't grow weaker. It grew stronger. As the circumstances became more difficult, they didn't believe less.

They believed more. And they testified to their faith, to the hospital staff and to the nurses and to the doctors. See, true Christian faith is not just when things are sunny and calm.

It's not just using Jesus' power to make life easy. True Christian faith is shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ. He wants us to trust him in strength and in weakness.

[12:39] In pleasure and in pain. And that's what it means to go deeper into the paradox of this power. That's what it means for our faith.

The question then is, well, how does it happen? How does our faith grow? How does the kingdom of God come into our hearts and grow stronger? And so we move secondly from going deeper into the paradox of his power to going wider and how it impacts the growth of the kingdom.

Now we mustn't miss this detail. We race over this detail. How does Jesus calm the storm? He doesn't stand up and wave his arms around and make some magic incantation.

He speaks just two words. Jesus exercises his paradoxical power over nature by his word.

Why does Mark tell us this? Why does Mark put this at the end of chapter 4? Why does he show us this power of Jesus he can control nature with just a word? We've got to put it back in its context.

[13:47] Mark deliberately ties this last story, this last incident in chapter 4, back into the whole chapter. You see the beginning of verse 35 right at the beginning of the incident? On that day, that's how it starts.

And that day goes from chapter 4 verse 1 to 34 where Jesus has been teaching in parables and the parables are about the word of God. And they are about the strange way of God where he works in our lives with the kingdom of God through the word of God.

And the parables show us the paradox again in a different way. The word of God is tiny, invisible, insignificant, hidden.

And it brings an astonishing transformation in the end. And I think, if anything, when you read through these parables, the focus is how insignificant and irrelevant and trivial the gospel of Christ is to the world.

That's why I think he finishes the chapter with this story. It's a spectacular demonstration of the creative power of Jesus' word. But you see, this gospel that we believe, this little seed, it's so unimpressive in Vancouver.

[15:10] I mean, what do we have to say to our city with all its terrible needs and difficulties? And this is what we have to say. Christ Jesus and him crucified.

It's not very impressive, is it? It wasn't very impressive when the apostle Paul first took it to Corinth or to Rome in chains. It's not a message that's ever going to be fully acceptable to the world. But we believe in that message is the power of God for salvation for eternity. So we just, for a few minutes, have to look back earlier into the chapter.

Why is Jesus, why isn't he being more positive? Why isn't he just telling us all the good news that's going to happen? Why does he dishearten us? Why is he saying that?

The answer is that chapter 4 is a deliberate training exercise for the 12 apostles. So, those of you who are new with us, let me just say that from chapter 3, verse 6 onwards, if you just look back at it on the left of page 838, we know that Jesus is going to die.

[16:21] Here we are right early in the gospel, we know that Jesus is going to die. How is the work of Jesus and the mission of Jesus going to continue? How is this great kingdom that he's supposed to bring going to grow?

And the answer is, in chapter 3, he chooses 12 apostles. And they are an incredibly unimpressive group. They are incredibly average.

In fact, they're below average. The last one betrays them. They are inadequate. Completely inadequate. Their task is impossible.

Completely impossible. The opposition is implacable. And so chapter 4 is a training chapter for the apostles and for the church after Jesus rises from the dead.

After the resurrection, when Jesus leaves, what's the way God has for bringing people into the kingdom of God? Just cast your eye down, chapter 4, to verse 14. The sower sows the word.

[17:28] See? The seed is the word of God, the gospel. Soil, we are the hearers. The sower, well, he's probably the preacher.

And Jesus gives the picture of sowing seed. Not just preaching. It's every time the word of God, the gospel of God, enters into human hearts. And here is the paradox of power.

What seems so weak is actually where the power of God is. The kingdom of God grows not through mighty words and mighty deeds, but through these little words that seem so powerless and weak, through this little seed.

And when that little seed is planted into the hearts of men and women and boys and girls, what the Holy Spirit does with it is absolutely astonishing. This is very important for us as individuals and for us as a church.

What should we be on about? What should our priorities be? What should we be doing? What should we be praying for? If you just look at the parable of the sower, just the second half from verses 15 onwards, I love the fact that Jesus never embellishes the truth.

[18:40] There's a profound realism. So familiar, isn't it? But it seems so hopeless. Three of the four seeds come to nothing.

Three quarters of the sowing is a complete waste of seed and energy. But the issue is not with the seed. It's not with the power of the seed, nor is it with the sower.

It's with the soil. Let me put it this way. The problem is not with the word of God or the preacher, but with the hearer. I've always wanted to say that.

It is so often with the preacher. Get me wrong. But here in this story, it's not. So four kinds of reception, four kinds of hearers. The first kind of hearer, this is talking about people here, in verse 15, their hearts are so hard, the seed doesn't even penetrate the surface of it.

See verse 15? These are those along the path, the rocky ground, where the word is sown. When they hear, when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that's sown in them.

[19:46] For some of you today, the word of God just bounces off your heart. You're not going to remember a thing I say. Satan takes it away.

More heartbreaking, I think, is the second group, 16 and 17, because it looks like the seed has gone into the ground. These are the ones sown on rocky ground. The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, but they have no root in themselves.

Endure for a while. Then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. There's joy. There's enthusiasm.

But the heart is shallow and the seed doesn't last. And the reason it doesn't last is because when troubles arise on account of this word, which it will, they give up.

I used to go to St. John's years and years ago, but I've given up all that. Now, this is a caution to us who are parents and Sunday school teachers to beware of wanting just immediate results.

[20 : 54] Of course we rejoice with any response to the gospel. But Jesus cautions us to have the eyes on the long game. The third kind of hero shows even more promise, verse 18.

Others are sown among thorns. These are those who hear the word. But the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful.

You can't live in Vancouver without feeling the strength of this, can you? We all live busy lives. We all are under pressure. We all have cares and worries. But this here is just too busy.

Busy, busy, busy with other things. They just, you know, I can't afford to give God time in my diary. I'm distracted. So as I'm speaking to you now, you'll be thinking about something else, something else.

And distraction and the cares of this life, many of which are completely right and good, chokes our spiritual life.

[22 : 00] It's heartbreaking, doesn't it? Three out of four times the word of God. Looks like it has no power whatsoever, does it? But here's the other side of the paradox, the fourth soil, verse 20.

Those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold.

Seed falls on every kind of hearer. Every hearer hears the word. The difference with this, the only difference, is this person accepts the word. When you hear the word and accept it, you are hearing the voice of the one who stilled the storm, who created the world.

This voice that we hear in the gospel and in the scriptures is more important than anything else in all the world. That's why we gather here on Sundays, to hear the word of God. And to accept it means to believe what God says and to obey what God says and to give all of myself to hearing all of what God says and trying to live on it.

And it has astonishing power. It reproduces itself 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold. I mean, if you have an investment and it gives those sorts of returns, you're going to be in the newspaper.

You're going to start a business. 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold. I've got a name for you. But this is the power of the seed. Once God's word gets into our hearts, into your heart, into my heart, it's going to have astonishing results.

[23 : 36] There's absolutely nothing better that you could invest yourself in. You see the paradox? Exactly the same is true in the little parable in verse 26.

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and it grows. He knows, not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

And when the grain is ripe, at once he comes and puts in the sickle because the harvest have come. How does the kingdom of God grow in our hearts? It's not by some massive explosive growth.

It's gradual and it's invisible. Our task is to bring the seed into our hearts and into the hearts of one another. It's not the seed by itself, not the Bible on its own, nor is it us just on our own.

But it's bringing these things together. By listening to the word of God, by believing and obeying the word of God, there's no telling what God's power will do.

[24 : 41] And it's the same, of course, with the mustard seed. The next parable, which you all know, you know, the tiny mustard seed that grows into the big tree.

I want to tell a personal story, if I may, if you give me permission. I'll probably have to edit this out later. When I went to university in an unnamed university in an unnamed country very far away from here, my first year I began going to the Christian group.

And the Christian group was a complete shambles. We would meet week by week and nobody would have thought of anything to do. And so we'd fight about things and, you know, whoever was most needy that week would get the floor.

The big debates, there were several big debates in that first year about whether we should be Christian Marxists or Christian Trotskyites. They were the big issues, I promise you. In my second year, a very attractive, blonde, Presbyterian young woman came to university by the name of Bronwyn.

And I felt something needed to happen, and so I began to meet with her to pray. And we did pray, didn't we, Bron?

[26 : 05] We did. And we had a couple of other people come and join us. And so we decided that we would try and make the group at least a Christian group. So they tasked me with writing a constitution.

I was 19. And I'm embarrassed. And we managed to get the constitution through because our meeting room was next to the bar and a significant proportion of the room was drunk and we managed to get the vote by 51%.

I shouldn't tell you that story, but that's the way it happened. And so I signed my name to the constitution. And then we decided to start some Bible study groups and small groups. And Bron had one and I had one. Another woman had one. And we decided together to split up the most difficult people. And the small groups, they were just a disaster.

I mean, they were a disaster. I had the best group. The most promising person in my group was a young woman. And each week she would bring another boyfriend along and she'd sit in the corner kissing him.

[27 : 13] Just kissing, kissing, kissing. It was terrible. And not the kissing, the group. I mean, I...

Anyway, Bron and I left university and lo and behold, some 20 years after that, I was back in Australia speaking at a conference.

And someone came up to me breathlessly, said, are you David Short? I said, I am. Oh, they said, we've just had the 20-somethingth anniversary of the Christian group at that unnamed university. And I said, really, what's going on? They have nearly a thousand young people meeting in small groups and gathering around the Bible in a big meeting once a week. They've got half a dozen full-time workers they pay for on campus together.

And all this happened after I left. But it's a wonderful picture, isn't it? That we didn't know what we were doing, but we planted the seed and the seed continued to be planted and God has brought amazing things from it.

[28 : 20] And this is what happens. This tiny mustard seed grows into the greatest tree on the planet because all the kingdoms of the earth will come and go, but the kingdom of God will outlast and outgrow every kingdom.

And that's why we are committed to planting the seed in our own selves and in the lives of others. And I think this chapter is here so that the 12 would put their confidence in the right place. Because if your confidence is not in the right place, you're going to try and do something else to make things happen and in the end you'll end up distorting the word of God and missing the real power, the paradoxical power of Jesus.

And Jesus is speaking to every one of us today as well about the place of the word in our hearts. That's why the stilling of the storm has to stay tied to the parables. Because in the parables, Jesus tells us about the paradoxical power of his word.

But in the stilling of the storm, he shows us. Last Saturday night, I had the privilege of meeting the two clergy from Malawi who'd been with us. They flew home on Monday.

[29 : 35] I thank them for their fellowship with us, for their standing with us. We are much indebted to them. I asked them what they saw God doing here at St. John's.

Actually, I asked them what's wrong with St. John's and how we could fix it. But this is what they said. They talked with open-eyed amazement about their time here.

They said, we have been in so many different groups and in all the groups, people have had the Bibles open. They said, your children, your young people had the Bibles open, are reading the Bible and praying together.

They said, we want to do this back in our diocese. And I reckon if we could bring these 12 apostles, or at least 11 of them, forward in time, and see the truth of Jesus' words here.

And I imagine in their ministries after Jesus rose again that they struggled with the paradox of Jesus' power. the apparent absence of Jesus. They had many waves and many storms and a great deal when the wind howled and I think their faith was stretched and purified.

[30 : 43] Things became much more difficult and they had to trust Jesus that he wouldn't just rescue them from death but through death and beyond death. And he did. And you can tell when they write their epistles, they really want to call all the brothers and sisters back to this simple thing, back to the word of God.

This little word that seems so ineffective and foolish and even offensive. And I finish with these words from the apostle Peter who was there that day in the boat.

And he says this, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. Since you've been born again, how? Not by a perishable seed but by an imperishable through the living and abiding word of God. For all flesh is like grass, its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, the flower falls but the word of the Lord remains forever and this word is the gospel that was preached to you. Amen.