

Picnic on the grass: Mark 6.3-44

Thanks to Rod Hill for today's TFTD — and to Bob Tuffin for this lovely photo of the astonishing greenness of a Galilean springtime.



Mark tends to move his gospel narrative on at quite a pace and this is particularly evident in today's passage. He finishes telling us about John the Baptizer, as we heard yesterday, in verse 29 of chapter 6, with John's disciples laying his body in the tomb. There's no kind of pause for reflection at that point as the Evangelist moves us straight on with 'the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that **they** had done and taught'.

And so, on we go, at breakneck speed. They didn't even have chance to take a break for a meal – I know what that feels like some days, when it's one zoom meeting straight after another all day long! But Jesus knows that the disciples need a bit of breathing space: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (v.31).

We all need a bit of breathing space from time to time. We all need a day 'off duty' (and that includes some of our lay folks who are so busy doing things for the church and other things that they seem to be busier in retirement than when they were in work – give yourselves some breathing space, for heavens' sake – literally).

If the disciples needed to take a break, so too did the crowd who had dashed around to follow Jesus "This is a remote place," the disciples said, "and it's already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and

villages and buy themselves something to eat.” And then we get what is, to many of us, a very familiar dialogue:

7 But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages^[e]! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

38 “How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

39 Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.

Did you notice the curious little detail here? It isn’t just the grass that Jesus asks them to sit down on but, according to Mark **green grass**. Is this because Mark is wanting to tell us the time of year when this incident took place, that this was a spring picnic? After all, the grass is brown for much of the year in that part of the world.

For all his desire to keep the pace of the narrative up, Mark inserts this little detail, ‘green’ grass. Why?

At the end of this story, he gives us another little detail: *44 The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand*. Now, is this the same incident as recorded in Mark 8, where 4,000 were fed? If so, why the different numbers? (Does it matter?) Or were there two picnics on the grass? In this story, in Mark 6, the disciples are shown in a good light, whereas in chapter 8 they are blamed for not thinking to bring food when they’re going home in the boat.

Why is Mark including this or these stories? What’s it all about? When John tells the same story it’s a lead in to Jesus’ teaching about the nature of discipleship (“I am the bread of life”: John ch.6) but not here. Some suggest that is a foretaste of the great Messianic banquet that will take place in heaven, but I don’t find that convincing.

For me, this is all part of the great theme that Mark seems to have for the first part of his gospel; a slow discovery of who Jesus is, set in the context of a fast-paced story about the events of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. This is all part of the trail of clues that lead up to the profound question that Jesus asks the disciples in Chapter 8, but we’ll get to that next week.

For now, as the lockdown begins to ease and outdoor picnics and the like start to look like a real possibility, what will it be like to meet with friends and family again? Will we see Jesus in the midst of those gatherings? Will they be events of such a blessing that we will want to say, ‘Praise the Lord’? And will we want, in that context, to

remember the abundant blessings that God pours down on us so much that we could, figuratively speaking, pick up 12 baskets of leftovers because God has given us so much?

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