

main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – seven

Jesus and a blind man – Mk 8.22-26

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

This seventh **encounter in Mark's Gospel** finds us in the Jewish lakeside village of Bethsaida, where the people of the village bring a blind man to Jesus to see what he will do. If we watch carefully, perhaps we will see new things too.

STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
 - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
 - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
 - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 8.22-26**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 8.22-26** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 8.22-26** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 8.22-26** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

Mark 8.22-26 is one of those stories that is only given to us in Mark's Gospel. The 'double touch' healing and the 'trees walking' idea are memorable, even unique, but other details may be significant too, even though we might struggle to remember them.

3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- "What is this story about?"

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

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6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing, in turn, at each corner of the triangle:

Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of the blind man, consider:

- **What do we think this blind man learned from meeting Jesus?**
 - *teasing this out ... What had blindness done to this man's world? What would leading him out of the village do to him? What did healing do for this man? Why might Jesus have told him to avoid going back to the village?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from his encounter with this blind man?**
 - *teasing this out ... What might Jesus have been experiencing as he led the blind man out of the village area? What might Jesus have learned from the two-stage quality of this particular healing?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching these proceedings?**
 - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

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8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG (optional)

LEAVING BETHSAIDA based on Mark 8:22-26 tune: Sussex Carol, Rejoice and Sing no.153

1.

If all my world, entire, complete,
is no more than this village street,
these things familiar, safe and known
that, by default, I call my home,
come, Jesus, breach both fear and doubt -
take my hand now, and lead me out.

2.

If I am blind to who you are
and have no faith to travel far,
if I'm reliant on the crowd
to lead me, tell me what's allowed,
come, Jesus, touch me, set me free -
heal me, help me, and let me see!

3.

If, still, my vision's blurred, unsure,
improved, but far from total cure,
if people still are hard to read,
then still for help I'll pray and plead;
come, Jesus, touch and heal once more
till I see all you have in store.

4.

If open-eyed and looking round
I'm dazzled by the world I've found,
its joy, its hope, its grief, its loss
all brought to focus by your cross
then, Jesus, through the love you've shown,
where you are will remain my home.

John M. Campbell

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction** to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel' programme on the Vision4Life website:*

www.vision4life.org.uk

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part one – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole-Gospel storyline?:

The bit before our bit (Mk 8.14-21)

- **Seeing and understanding** – As Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee their conversation is layered with misunderstandings. Jesus gets frustrated with the disciples for not finding deep meaning in the number of baskets of collected crumbs after the two miraculous feasts – this still escapes most of us today. However, in the midst of all this confusion Jesus talks of the disciples failure to understand as being like blindness (v.18) – ‘Do you have eyes and fail to see?’ It is this connection between understanding and seeing / blindness that will link our story of a man whose blindness is cured, but at first only partially, with the story that follows it...

The bit after our bit (Mk 8.27-38)

- **The hinge of the whole Gospel** – This story is about understanding the most important single thing in the Gospel – who Jesus is. Immediately following our story of a man who sees, but needs a second touch to see clearly, we have this story of Peter understanding that Jesus is God's chosen and anointed one ('Messiah'), but completely failing to accept the death that Jesus believes to be its inevitable result. Our story gives us crucial evidence as to how Mark views the failure of Peter and the others to accept what Jesus says about the necessity of his impending death. Their understanding of Jesus is still a bit like 'trees walking', and remains so.

Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

- **How Mark helps his hearers to see** – Mark is kinder to us than Jesus appears to be to his disciples. He seems to have put our story about a two-stage recovery from blindness just before the crucial story about who the Messiah is and what he has to do, so that it can help us to spot the inadequate understanding of the disciples. That is important, because we spend most of the Gospel identifying with the disciples in their good intentions and even their dismal delivery of support and understanding. Later, at the end of Chapter 10, when the disciples are increasingly reluctant to enter Jerusalem with Jesus and are asking all sorts of increasingly stupid questions, there is another story of a blind man in Jericho who is instantly healed and then leads the way towards Jerusalem – again, a contrast with the disciples.

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part two – learning about Jesus' world

Real fears about loss of sight

The fear of going blind must have been very real in Jesus' community, as the risk of it happening, due to any one of a number of diseases, was considerable. Everyone would know people in their community and even in their family who had gradually or suddenly lost their sight. Now, this blind man in Bethsaida could talk easily about seeing trees, so we may reasonably presume that he had seen trees before and must, therefore, at some point in his life, have lost his sight. What everyone dreaded must have happened to him.

What might it mean to lose your sight?

Loss of sight must, in its own way, have been almost as devastating as a leprous skin disease. You would not be put out of your house and practically cut off by your family and community, as would happen to a leper, but for a man who went blind there would be a huge loss of status. Instead of being responsible for everyone in your household you would now, yourself, become a dependant, and, for example, the suspicion that children were playing disrespectful games around you could grow unchecked whether or not the children did so. Life, whatever it was now, would not be what it had been before. Add all this to the personal grief, distress and anger of losing your sight and the long journey of acquiring practical skills for a significantly different way of being and doing.

Being blind in Bethsaida

It would seem reasonable to suggest that the effective 'known world' of a blind person in Bethsaida in Jesus' time would be restricted to the village itself. Here the routes between buildings might reasonably be memorised and here there would be neighbours and family to help and guide. However, excursions beyond the confines of the village would require the guidance of a trusted companion. All this surely adds significance to the comment in our story (v23) that, before he healed him, Jesus personally took this blind man by the hand and **led him out of the village**. Is there, then, a further significance in Jesus finally telling this man, who can now see well, to go home, but **not** to go into the village? Is this Jesus' (or Mark's) way of saying now there is no going back?