

# How's Your Vision?

Mark 8:22-26

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 7 August 2005

This message draws heavily on the text of a message given by Brian Harris at Mt Roskill Baptist Church.

## Introduction

A couple of years ago our trusty Nissan Primera started making a clunking noise, a very expensive-sounding clunking noise. I promptly took it in to the local service station and, to my surprise, the guy there assured me that it was nothing worse than a fan belt that needed a service. So he gave it a lube and away I drove. Problem fixed – or so I thought. Several weeks later, in the middle of the Christmas break, while we were on the long drive back from Wairoa, the noise started up again. This time, I recall, it was accompanied by a suspicious burning odour. Back in Auckland, we took the car back in to another service station where the guy said, "There's a problem with the cam shaft But I can fix it." Two and a half thousand dollars later, the car was eventually fixed. Second time around. Don't you hate it when things like that happen? One of the really great things about Jesus is that whenever he fixes something, he fixes it perfectly, first time.

Well, usually. This is one of those frustrating "didn't-get-it-right-first-time" repair jobs. It's an intriguing story. Some people bring a blind man to Jesus and ask him to fix their friend's eyesight. Jesus spits on the man's eyes, which seems a little abusive until you remember that this is 30AD. The state of medical science is not particularly advanced. People thought back then that saliva had medicinal properties, that physical touch had healing qualities. Jesus is simply following the conventional medical practice of his day. And it seems to work. When he asks his patient, "Do you see anything?" the guy replies, "I do see something. I can see people, but they're blurry. They look trees walking around." So Jesus has another crack. Again he places his hands on the man's eyes and this time Mark says the man "saw everything completely." The Greek word is *teleugos*, which implies the man was able to see clearly at a distance. His vision is perfectly restored.

This story in Mark chapter 8 is unique. It's the only recorded instance where Jesus doesn't get it right first time. The question you have to ask is "Why did this miracle take two goes? Why wasn't the healing instant?" Was Jesus just having an off day? Even experienced rugby kickers have their bad days, when they can't seem to get the ball through the posts from right in front. Is Jesus just a bit off-colour? Or is there something more?

## Persevering prayer

In studying the Bible it's always important to look at the surrounding context. Perhaps there's a clue in the next chapter. In chapter 9, after Jesus and his closest friends have been up the Mount of Transfiguration, they come down and Jesus is asked to heal a demon-possessed boy. The other disciples have had a go, but failed. Jesus comes to the rescue and the boy is healed. But the disciples are clearly disappointed and confused. After all, chapter 6 recalls how Jesus had earlier sent them out on a short-term mission and they had healed many people and cast out many demons (Mark 6:6-13). Why couldn't they do it now? Jesus gives the answer in Mark 9:29: "This kind can come out only by prayer." (Or, as many early manuscripts say, "by prayer and fasting.") In other words, some demons are tougher than others. Some miracles are more difficult to perform. They require extra prayer, extra perseverance, a second go.

I wonder whether we tend to forget this. I talk to some people who are facing enormously difficult problems, and they seem to think a perfunctory prayer will do the trick. I talk with parents who are despairing over children or grandchildren who are going astray. I talk with couples who are struggling to keep their marriage afloat. I talk with people who are trying to do God's will but are discouraged by their lack of success. If I were to ask them, "How much praying and fasting have you done?" I wonder if the answer would be, "No fasting and, to be honest, not much praying." But Jesus is really clear. He can do the impossible. Miracles can happen, but some miracles aren't going to happen until we are serious enough or desperate enough to start praying earnestly.

## **Flickering faith**

There's another possibility as to why the miracle in this story took so long. Mark says Jesus took the man by the hand and led him outside the village of Bethsaida. This is interesting. Most of Jesus' miracles were done in public; this time he chooses to work in private, away from curious onlookers, away from the people of Bethsaida. Why? In Matthew 11:21 Jesus says, "Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, in sackcloth and ashes." The people of Bethsaida had proven themselves to be cynical and unwilling to believe in Jesus regardless of the many miracles he had already performed there. Maybe it was this general atmosphere of unbelief in Bethsaida – the lack of expectation – that made this healing difficult. Now let's not slip into legalism here. The only reason that we are ever healed of anything is because of the grace of God – because of his mercy, not because of our faith. But we also need to acknowledge the very important truth that our willingness to trust Jesus does make a difference to the outcome. How else do you understand the passage earlier in Mark 6:5-6 where the people of Nazareth refuse to believe in Jesus and Mark says, "He could not do many miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith." The lack of miracles is directly related to their lack of faith.

In South Africa there was a large a charismatic church where people were healed week after week. South African TV picked up on this and said they would broadcast a healing service on the air if a panel of medical experts could select the candidates for healing and verify each miracle as it happened. The senior pastor of that church, Theo Wolmarans, agreed. He shouldn't have. The people he had to pray for had no expectation that they would be healed and the doctors on the panel viewed the whole thing very cynically. The day of the televised service came. Guess how many miracles happened that day? None. The media scoffed and had tremendous fun, labelling the church a fraud. But the fact is that many people had been healed in that church and continued to be healed there afterwards. And many testified to the way in which God had touched them. But nothing happened that day because the church was filled with the cynical and those who would not believe. And you don't get healed in a circus. The simple but consistent spiritual principle is that you do not believe because you see miracles. You see because you choose to believe. And God doesn't often reverse that order.

## **Desperate desire**

I wonder if there's another reason why we have this story of a miracle that takes two goes. Notice the man's reaction when Jesus asks him the first time, "Do you see anything?" He says, "Yes. I do. I can see ... I can see people. It's blurry. They look like trees. But it's an awful lot better than seeing nothing. Thank you very much; goodbye," and then staggered home. I wonder if one of the reasons this miracle is recorded is to alert us to the possibility that we can be too quickly satisfied with the work that Jesus has done in our lives. When Jesus asks us, "Do you see anything?" we quickly reply, "Yeah. It's a bit fuzzy. But it's a lot better than it was. Thank you very much." And we don't realise that Jesus is willing to do a whole lot more for us. Do you know what I mean? The other week I had to take Sophie to the doctor's to have her vaccination shots. Immunization works by giving you a tiny dose of the disease you're being immunized against. That gets the body's immune system to develop the necessary antibodies to fight the disease so that, if later serious exposure to the disease occurs, your body's immune system is ready and willing to attack it. Sadly, little exposures to Jesus often do that to people. Just this week I was talking to a lovely non-Christian lady. She's picked up a half-truth or two about Jesus and thinks that's it. She's had just enough to immunize her against the real thing.

But it even happens to Christians. You have an encounter with God; your eyes are opened spiritually; your life is changed; and you're grateful. But then it's so easy to live off that encounter for weeks, if not years, and never think to ask God if there is still more that he wants to do. When there is. The whole point of this story is that Jesus was not content until the blind man's vision was perfect. This story about physical blindness is just a metaphor for spiritual blindness. Immediately before the passage Jesus laments that his disciples are spiritually blind. He says in v 18: "You have eyes but you don't see." They don't yet recognise that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Immediately after this story, when Jesus asks them, "Who do you say I am?" in a flash of inspiration, Peter, their spokesperson, says, "You are the Christ." They see at last, but their vision is still only partial. When Jesus explains that he, as the Messiah,

must suffer and die, Peter rebukes him. He and the disciples still don't quite see it. Jesus needs to keep working on them. And he does until they start to see clearly that Jesus had to die for the sins of the whole world, that God loves and wants a relationship with every single person on this planet. Jesus is not content to stop working on us until we see people as he sees them.

I recently read a story about a man whose young son was forever running his small metal cars along the top of the family's rather expensive coffee table. It drove the man nuts, seeing the nice piece of furniture scratched and marred. So eventually he issued the boy with a threat: "Next time I catch you using the coffee table for a drag strip, you'll get a whack." That evening as the man came home from work, one of the first things he saw was the bright-eyed three year old making loud car noises and pushing his toy most energetically across the surface of the table. Something in him snapped and he marched over to the table to deliver a sound wallop. But his advance on the boy was interrupted by his wife, who stood between the pair, eyeballing her husband and asking gently but firmly, "Why are you going to beat a million dollar child over a three hundred dollar coffee table?" How do you view those closest to you? Million dollar people for whom Jesus died? Million dollar people whom God loves? Jesus wants to give us perfect vision, that we'd see people as he sees them, that we'd see Jesus as he really is. But it means admitting that our vision isn't perfect, that we need him to touch us again.

### **Generous grace**

You can read this story in a legalistic, anxiety-inducing way. If we don't ask, we won't get what God wants to give. If we don't expect to be healed, we won't. If we fall into the trap of being content with a partial healing, that's all we'll ever know. Fair enough. That's all part of the passage. But don't lose sight of the fact that the main part of the passage is all about grace. Jesus took a man who was probably expecting nothing, spends time with him, checks on his progress, and doesn't leave until he's completely healed. That's grace. The same grace that took Jesus to the cross for you. The same grace that is reaching out to you today. We're about to celebrate communion. Perhaps you came expecting nothing. But Jesus is saying: "I am willing to do so much more for you. I want you to see others as I see them. I want you to see me as I really am. Let me heal you. Let me touch you."

### **Questions**

1. Have you ever seen or experienced a miraculous healing? What was it like?
2. Do you remember the tragic case of a little boy called Caleb Moorehead? His sincere and deeply religious Seventh Day Adventist parents refused any medical treatment saying they would trust in prayer instead. As a result, their son died from what would normally have been a relatively minor ailment. His parents were trying to be pious and trusting, but were they actually following the example of Jesus?
3. Why do you think Jesus needed "two goes" with the miracle in this story?
4. One implication could be that some miracles need more prayer than others. Are there situations in your life that God is calling you to recommit to praying about over the long haul?
5. Do you think it's possible that a lack of faith on the part of the people of Bethsaida or even the blind man himself limited Jesus' ability to perform this healing?
6. "One of the great tragedies in church is that it's filled with people who are satisfied with far less than what God is willing to give." Discuss.
7. Do you know anyone who has been "inoculated" against the gospel by one or two half-truths about Jesus and Christianity? How could you gently expose them to the full truth?
8. Where are you blind and need your vision touched afresh by Jesus?