

Matthew 16:1-12
No pearls before swine

Beware of hard-hearted disbelief

If ever the sci-fi films come true, and earth is

Overhead: invaded by aliens (Mars Attacks / Independence Day / Earth Stood Still)

it's possible that Russia, China and the USA might end up fighting for a common cause. Perhaps it's even *hopeful* that they would. Though, given the current three leaders of those three nations, it could be interesting being a fly on the wall as they worked on things together.

So there is that old saying of

Overhead: my enemy's enemy is my friend

Certainly that's what we've got here in this passage in Matthew 16, which starts off with two groups who were much more usually in profound disagreement between themselves:

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, ...

(Matthew 16:1)

The Pharisees we have met before quite frequently. Some of them popped up in the previous chapter, along with another group, the “scribes”, who are their more natural allies.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem ...

(Matthew 15:1)

Sometimes you'll see that word “scribes” translated as “experts in the Law”, and the Jewish Law was indeed what they both specialised in. Scribes perhaps more in the minutiae of interpretation, and the Pharisees more in implementing it. But you could see how these would tend to be natural allies, and naturally fall into a legalistic approach to life. Nowadays we'd call these the religious conservatives, rigidly sticking to traditions, and quite likely starting to think that by keeping all these rules and rituals, you *earn* God's favour, you *qualify* for heaven.

But these Sadducees, they're at the other end of the theological spectrum. You get an explanation of their approach, and how much it differs from the Pharisees, over in Acts:

For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

(Acts 23:8)

So if the Pharisees are modern-day legalists, the Sadducees are modern-day *liberals* (theologically speaking), who are quite happy to play fast and loose with what the Scriptures present to us as facts. If legalists think you *earn* heaven, liberals just question its existence at all.

But the curious thing is that they agreed to cease their mutual feuding, based on that

Overhead: my enemy's enemy ...

approach, and unite to try to bring Jesus down.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him ...

(Matthew 16:1)

That is a word which usually has a negative nuance. It has the expectation of failure. It's looking for the cracks ... and then levering them open. The interesting question is precisely why. What is it about Jesus that brings these two opposing groups together in opposition to him? What unites the Pharisees and the Sadducees, deep down? Although they appear so different, how are they just different manifestations of the same thing?

I'd like to suggest to you that they are just different sides of the same coin, that of not just unbelief, but *disbelief*, an active rejection of Jesus despite all the evidence that has already accumulated. In this passage, **Jesus warns his disciples of the insidious disbelief common to both Pharisees and Sadducees.**

Disbelief and departure
Little faith, but learning

■ Disbelief and departure (1-4)

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, ...

(Matthew 16:1)

Just where is probably significant. You might remember that the latter part of the previous chapter was set in Gentile territory:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

(Matthew 15:21)

... and from there onto the more Gentile shores of the Sea of Galilee. But right at the end of the chapter,

And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

(Matthew 15:39)

There's not complete agreement about precisely where that Magadan region was, but it's generally thought to be back to a more Jewish setting. Several times we've noted that Jesus has been backing off away from confrontation with the Jewish establishment – confrontation that would undoubtedly escalate too quickly. He has an appointment in Jerusalem still some months away, on a green hill far away, without a city wall, and an old rugged cross. But that needs to be delayed until the right time, the very precise moment.

Things are moving towards that point, just as a river picks up speed and hastens towards a waterfall. But there are people who have no feel for that movement of the tide:

“... you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

(Matthew 16:3)

And the settled opposition of these people has meant that Jesus has been keeping out of their reach. So the way Matthew describes it now – putting the two chapters

together – is a hint at the level of tension that is already being felt. No sooner than he arrives back into Jewish territory ...

... he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, ...

(Matthew 15:39-16:1)

This is the only time that Sadducees are mentioned anywhere other than at Jerusalem. They're not just theological liberal, but they are also highly political animals, with influence in the corridors of Jewish power far beyond their relatively small numbers. For them to venture *this* far from their familiar haunts – as well as allying with the Pharisees – means they regard Jesus as a very serious threat indeed.

But because of a heart attitude of *disbelief*, it looks as if they don't for a moment stop to consider whether what Jesus said could have been true. And therefore his various miracles need to be not just challenged, but disproved.

... to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

(Matthew 16:1)

Now you might just stop and ask, *Hold on now, what about all these pages and pages of miracles we've been reading about here? What about those thousands of people healed? Don't they count for anything?* Maybe that is what that "from heaven" bit is talking about. What about something with some greater, unquestionable spectacle, like Elijah calling down fire from heaven? Those feedings of the (Jewish) 5000 and the (Gentile) 4000 ... so you claim, Jesus, that you're something like a new Moses, who gave the people bread *from heaven* ... but all we saw was just stuff happening on earth, with hands going into baskets. What about stuff coming down *from heaven*, like that manna of old did?

Implication of that disbelief: that you can't do it ... or perhaps even better, that you'll feel forced into trying, but fail. And then we have you!

And of course Jesus *could* do that kind of thing. Facing the cross, there was that temptation ... but one that he resisted. It *has* to be the way of the Cross.

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

(Matthew 26:53-54)

So Jesus refuses to play their game. What happens, when we think about it, is really quite tragic. First we hear his answer, appealing to the kind of weather know-how that works quite conveniently with our geography too:

He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.'"

(Matthew 16:2-3)

We've got it, too. "Red sky at night, shepherds' delight." Folks, we can be all very canny in all sorts of ways. We can understand meteorology. We can understand differential calculus. We can speak half a dozen languages, or complete the *Times* crossword without needing to consult a dictionary. But none of those feats equate with spiritual insight.

You can have all sorts of letters after your name, and a sprinkling of them relating to theology, but in terms of understanding the grace of God in the Gospel you can still be a dull as ditchwater:

“... *but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*”

(Matthew 16:3)

You can't see that here, standing before you, so many of those prophecies are being fulfilled in the person of the one speaking these very words. You are mere months away from the tipping point of the whole of human history, and you are just totally unaware of it.

Folks, don't think that because someone is educated, they are more open to the Gospel. It's possible it even works the other way around, as Jesus had previously mentioned:

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

(Matthew 11:25-26)

Be encouraged by that. You do not have to be clever to be a child of God. You just have to be “little children” ... and you've been there, done that, and got the ripped t-shirt with mud and ketchup stains as proof.

But what does that kind of *disbelieving* approach to Jesus show?

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, ...”

(Matthew 16:4)

The Pharisees, particularly, would have boasted of their faithfulness to God. But Jesus labels them as spiritual adulterers. Your heart is already somewhere else, even if your body is present in the marital home. You reject the multiplied evidences of his love, and then all so piously ask for a token of it. Well, Jesus is not going to play that game. There *will* be a sign, but not the one that *these* people call for.

“... but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”

(Matthew 16:4)

Jesus has said this before, with a bit more explanation.

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

(Matthew 12:40)

But is Jesus now declining to enlarge upon his answer to this same demand being made a second time? Is this an implied, “I've already responded to this. Go and check out what I said then”?

Because what we read now is really sad. It is, I think, where I've got my title from, Jesus' teaching that there comes a time when no more time is to be wasted.

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

(Matthew 7:6)

We'll see the truth of that when we hear the accusing voices, come the next Passover. These hard-hearted disbelievers will return to attack Jesus at, apparently, his weakest point, helpless before the courts and the cross.

And, perhaps knowing this, Jesus simply leaves.

So he left them and departed.

(Matthew 16:4)

That “leave” word is a strong one. It could be translated “abandoned” or “forsook”. It is scarily final.

Folks, beware *dis*belief, that settled attitude of rejecting Jesus.

As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts ...”

(Hebrews 3:15)

For these *dis*believers, there came a point when Jesus simply walked away. Disbelief is finally rewarded with his departure.

But that is not the same as someone with merely *little* faith. Such as, you might think at times, you and me.

■ Little faith, but learning (5-12)

We're just left to presume another boat trip – and this would be, once again, back to Gentile territory again, I think.

When the disciples reached the other side, ...

(Matthew 16:5)

And here is a problem. Minor in the big scheme of things, perhaps, but uncomfortable. Only a single loaf of bread between them, as Mark records it. Possibly everyone had thought that everyone else was sorting it. Perhaps Jesus has just walked directly away from that previous encounter, and nobody thought about it in the unusual rush to depart.

... they had forgotten to bring any bread.

(Matthew 16:5)

And possibly a problem, as if this is a Gentile area again, the food there is technically unclean. I know Jesus has already told them, just recently, that what you eat can't make you unclean, but there's still maybe some kind of residual discomfort about doing something you've thought was wrong for years.

But just look now how Jesus' comment triggers a rather strange response. Their concern – perhaps embarrassment – about the lack of bread means they just do not tune in at all to what he is getting at.

Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.”

(Matthew 16:6-7)

Folks, a quick question for you. How quickly do you find yourself labouring under vague guilt feelings? The disciples here pick up on the word “leaven” – which Jesus is I suppose fairly obviously, at least now that we've read the full passage, using in a non-literal way – and because of that embarrassed feeling of low-level failure, they are just totally distracted by this.

So do you feel you need to upgrade just standard human failings – forgetfulness, tiredness, those moments of being caught off-guard and not reacting perfectly – do you feel you have to regard them as full-on sins?

A strange and not really very proper thought comes into your mind. Do you spend the next hour in self-examination, turning that image or that reaction over in your thinking, fighting all the time not to relish it further. When wouldn't it be better to better to say quickly to God, *No, I'm not going there*, and deliberately focus on something far more wholesome?

There is that saying that

Overhead: “mud sticks”

Sometimes I think we *let* mud stick more than we need to, because we spend our time handling it instead of simply rejecting it.

Still ... back to our passage. Jesus is not so hard on his disciples. He does not verbally lash them for their dullness. He has met a few people with great faith. There was one of them in the previous section – a Gentile *and* a woman, both aspects of which are a bit of a surprise. But I think we have to face it. Most of us are actually run-of-the-mill, “little-faith” disciples, much of the time.

But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?”

(Matthew 16:8)

Maybe we like to think of ourselves as the big hero in the story, like Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal. But actually, most of the time, we're the crowd watching, the people who he challenged with the words

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

(1 Kings 18:21)

So there's no bread – or technically, just one little loaf? Guys, think back just a bit! How many people have been fed miraculously in the last few days?

“Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?”

(Matthew 16:9-10)

So that's nearly 10,000 men, plus families. Do you *really* think that a dozen of us with a single loaf is going to prove to be much of a problem, if it comes to it?

“How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?”

(Matthew 16:11)

So that can't be it. So listen again:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

(Matthew 16:11)

And the penny drops for them.

Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

(Matthew 16:12)

Now, folks, there are just a few things that I would like to say about that before I finish. Some of it should be comforting, some of it should help us to think a bit more clearly, and some of it might be a more personal kind of challenge.

Overhead: first, repetition

Be comforted by the fact that these disciples, even if they had been with Jesus for several years now, still didn't get things right away. Folks, *nor do we*. There are going to be things that we have to hear over and over until they start to sink in. I really do think that is the case with that most important, most basic word about the Good News, that word

Overhead: grace

So simple to say. Such a lovely name to give to a new daughter. So many recent church plants have called themselves “Grace Church”. But it is a word with absolutely wonderful depths to keep exploring. Just like those two groups who joined together to trap Jesus, we fall to one side or the other of misunderstanding that word. That's the second point I want to make.

Overhead: a single teaching

There is salvation by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ alone, and there is everything else. All the everything else becomes pretty much one and the same, in comparison.

We can become like the Pharisees, and think that grace is not enough. We have to contribute to our salvation. We have to keep rules. We have to perform rituals. The more and fancier and nitpickier the better. But the further we get from the free unmerited favour of God to us in Jesus Christ, that we can receive simply by believing in Jesus Christ.

Or we can become like the Sadducees, and think that grace and all this God stuff is not really real. Just nice words. Just a convenient code to live by, but preferably cut free from those specifics like Jesus actually doing what the Bible says he did, and says is important.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ...

(1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

No, says the Sadducee, we don't need that. God, if he or she or it or them actually exist, isn't greatly fussed how we think or how we live. We just need to put on the appropriate degree of religious show, and make the most of our time on earth.

One way or the other, grace isn't actually enough, or grace isn't actually needed. And I think that's why Jesus used a singular word here, rather than the plural:

... ***the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.***

(Matthew 16:12)

Not their various, different, conflicting teachings, but that underlying core where they are the same. They unite in *disbelief*. Different doctrines – totally conflicting doctrines, you would think – can actually have one and the same underlying foundation. Legalists and liberals are equally anti the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Trying to earn your salvation by keeping rules and living religiously is just as hopeless and graceless as trying to live without rules and ignoring God. *Both* ways ignore the fact of Jesus Christ, living, dying, and rising again. One says it's irrelevant, the other says it's not enough.

Finally: *beware of this teaching!*

Notice the picture language that Jesus uses here. Leaven or yeast. He's used the picture for one of his recent parables. See what its main characteristic is:

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

(Matthew 13:33)

It spreads. In the context of this false teaching, it contaminates. It causes a spiritual rot. We are hearing a lot about

Overhead: preventing infection

in these times of Coronavirus. We know about PPE, personal protective equipment. People have been debating for months the value of face coverings, and/or the distance that we need to keep from one another. But hard-hearted unbelief is worse than COVID-19. It is a disease of the soul. It doesn't linger on park benches, such that you can spray it down and flush it away. It doesn't disappear when you come indoors and wash your hands.

It can thrive in the self-serving corridors of power that the Sadducees stalk. It can thrive just as easily in the aisles and pews of a church, and deaden not just taste buds but our very souls. One of the questions I would like us to look at tonight is to think through how we can spot this, and what steps, even more important, can we take to limit the spread of this spiritual infection.

Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

(Matthew 16:6)

Folks, what are we doing here ... what are you doing in your own lives ... to detect and to guard against the deadly disease of hard-hearted disbelief? It takes more than just your own personal determination. The Bible tells us that it takes fellowship with other believers too – just to start off our thinking for this evening.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

(Hebrews 3:12-13)

Folks, remember that Jesus just walked, in response to the unbelief of his questioners. They had trampled their last pearl into the mud. The question is whether we will take Jesus' warning about unbelief to *our* hearts.

Beware of hard-hearted disbelief