



CHRISTIANITY|EXPLORED

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS
YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

Episode 2: Identity

Not so long ago I was invited out to lunch, and as I'd arrived a bit early, I waited on the stairs just off the main dining room.

Standing opposite me was another man. I vaguely recognized him, but thought nothing of it, so – as English people do – we gave each other a sheepish nod... and stood there awkwardly for five minutes in total silence. This lasted from 12.55 until one o'clock.

Anyway, at one o'clock, a man came from around the corner, looked up at the man beside me and exclaimed, "Ah William, there you are, we're in the private dining room".

Turns out it was Prince William.

I'd been with him for five whole minutes, and we had nothing better to do than talk to each other, and I hadn't said a single word!

And now I'd lost the opportunity.

It could have been so different.

I'm not saying that those five minutes would have changed my life, and I don't suppose we'd have become lifelong friends or any-thing like that, but I know the conversation would have been memorable.

Sadly, all I saw was a handsome well-dressed 25-year-old with thinning blond

hair. What I didn't see... was my future King. Now in William's case, missing his identity doesn't really matter. I just missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime conversation (and arguably so did he) but that's about it.

Sometimes, though, getting someone's identity right really does matter. Because if we don't get Jesus' identity right, we'll relate to him in totally the wrong way – or even ignore him completely.

And missing this King's identity would be disastrous.

That's why Mark gives us the historical evidence we need so that we can recognize Jesus for who he is – evidence that comes from the firsthand, eyewitness accounts of people who spent years by Jesus' side.

We're going to focus on five ways that Mark reveals Jesus' identity. Mark wants us to understand, by showing Jesus' power and authority, that Jesus really does have the right to be in charge: that he really is God's only chosen King.

Our first block of evidence is about Jesus' power and authority to teach. Mark gives an example of this in chapter 1, verses 21 to 22:

"They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (Mark 1:21-22)

You see, what set Jesus apart from the other teachers was the way that he taught.

The teachers of the law didn't come up with their own material. They relied on the great teachers of the past, and just gave their opinions on what others had said.

But Jesus was very different. He didn't need to stand on anyone else's authority. He claimed authority of his own, and you can see the effect that this had on people. We read that they were "amazed" at his words and asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!" (Mark 1:27)

This young man, with hardly any education to speak of, was suddenly providing brilliant answers to questions that baffled even the wisest of teachers.

So he could teach, but was Jesus able to live out what he taught?

I have to say this was the first thing I found so compelling about Jesus.

At 16 I started to keep a journal. I decided I was such a great guy that I owed it to the world to preserve the details of my life.

What I found as I looked at what I'd written was my own selfishness. There was such a contradiction between the way I presented myself in my journal, and the way I actually lived in reality.

But Jesus was not a hypocrite. For example, he taught, *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* Later, as he was being killed, he prayed for his executioners, *"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing"*. Now that is practising what you preach.

But Jesus wasn't just a teacher. Our second block of evidence shows that Jesus has power and authority over sickness. One example of this comes in Mark chapter 1 verses 29 to 31:

"As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-

law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.” (Mark 1:29-31)

Here we see Jesus demonstrating absolute authority over sickness. Just a touch of his hand and the fever is cured – and this is not an isolated incident either.

Three verses later, in verse 34, we read that Jesus cured whole crowds of sick people. Soon after that, a man with leprosy comes to him. It was a disease so terrible that no one even wanted to go near those who were suffering with it. Filled with compassion, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man, and his touch instantly cures him. Mark also tells us that Jesus cured people of spiritual suffering as well as physical suffering, releasing people from demonic oppression.

By verse 12 of chapter 2, everyone is amazed, saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this”.

As you might expect, someone with that kind of power does not go unnoticed elsewhere. For example, Josephus, a historian of Jesus’ time who was not a Christian, called Jesus a “doer of wonderful deeds”. Although people disagreed about where it came from, no one – not even Jesus’ enemies – doubted Jesus’ power.

Then thirdly, and perhaps even more amazingly, we see that Jesus has power and authority over nature.

Jesus and his followers are in a boat on the lake of Galilee, and this is what happens in chapter 4 verses 37 to 39.

“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly

swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’

“He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.” (Mark 4:37-39)

Now the Greek word translated “furious squall” actually means “whirlwind”. As the waves break over the boat, nearly swamping it, Jesus’ followers (some of whom are hardened fishermen) are convinced they’re about to die.

In their terror they wake Jesus. But Jesus simply gets up, says a few words and immediately everything is perfectly calm.

The disciples then ask each other a question we may be asking ourselves:

“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41)

However, in the next chapter the disciples witness something even more astonishing. They witness Jesus’ power and authority... over death. That’s our fourth block of evidence about Jesus’ identity, and it’s in Mark chapter 5.

“When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, ‘My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.’” (Mark 5:21-23)

Here we have a religious leader, a synagogue ruler named Jairus, in agony be-

cause he is powerless to help his young daughter who is dying.

Imagine the desperation and powerlessness you would feel if your own child was dying. That's the emotional intensity here.

Death wasn't an issue for me until I was 16. But then my godfather was killed suddenly when he lost his footing on a cliff path. And then I discovered for myself how painful death is, not least because it severs relationships with people we dearly love... and loving relationships are so hard to come by.

I remember coming across a bereavement card that said, "Those whom we have loved never really go away". But that's a lie. That's the whole problem – they do go away and we miss them terribly.

"Some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. 'Your daughter is dead,' they said. 'Why bother the teacher any more?'

"Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, 'Don't be afraid; just believe.'" (Mark 5:35-36)

Now what kind of a man is able to say to a grieving father, "Don't worry, just put your trust in me"? It's either the voice of a man who is spectacularly misguided, or the voice of one who is supremely confident of his own power.

You've got to be very sure of yourself to say that to a man who has just lost his daughter.

"He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.

He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at him.

"After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha koum!' (which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!'). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished." (Mark 5:37-42)

Well, you would be, wouldn't you? Jesus tells them the girl isn't dead – she's just sleeping. Then he takes the hand of the corpse, says "Get up", and the father is reunited with the daughter he thought was lost to him forever.

The message is clear. It's as easy for Jesus to raise someone from the dead as it is for us to rouse someone from sleep.

Now, if this is a man who has power and authority over death, surely it would be madness to ignore him, to say, "I'm just not interested in this" or, "This is boring" or, "Well, that's fine for you to believe". One day, you and I are going to die. After the evidence we've just seen, the question we must ask ourselves is this: "Can I trust Jesus with my own death"?

But I have to say "Quiet, be still" and "Get up" are not the most outrageous things Jesus says in Mark. For that we have to go our final block of evidence, in chapter 2 verses 1 to 5:

"A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him

a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" (Mark 2:1-5)

Now, those words really are extraordinary. Here's a man who presumably wants to be cured of his paralysis – and Jesus wants to cure him of his sin. Why would Jesus think sin was a more pressing issue than the man's paralysis? To understand that, we need to understand what the Bible means by the word sin.

A while back a national newspaper had an article on "The Seven Deadly Sins" and the writer said this: "In this day and age sin has lost its sting. A bit of sinning is much more likely to be seen as a spot of grown-up naughtiness. The kind of thing that sends a delicious shock through the system."

That's what many people think of sin these days: it's not very serious, it's a bit of fun on the side. But the Bible says that there's nothing nice about sin. Jesus always taught that sin is man's biggest problem. It's not paralysis, not global warming, not terrorism or ecological disaster or poverty, not lack of education or spiritual enlightenment – but sin.

Sin isn't just doing naughty things. It's not just lust or laziness or whatever. According to the Bible, sin is ignoring our Creator in the world he has made. As we know, ignoring other human beings is damaging enough – to us and to them. And living without reference to the One who made us and gives us each breath is even more damaging. Because when I insist on my independence from the One who made me, and sustains my life, it will

lead to death. Not just here, but eternal death, described in the Bible as hell.

So that's why Jesus homes in on the problem of this man's sin. And the claim that Jesus makes here is that he has the power and authority to forgive our sin. You can see how staggering this is if you look at the way the religious leaders react.

"Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" (Mark 2:6-7)

Now, they don't mind the paralytic being called a sinner – they know everyone's a sinner. Their problem is with Jesus claiming to be able to forgive sin. If sin is ignoring God in the world he has made, then only God has the authority to forgive it. After all, if we do a person wrong, then only the wronged person has the right to forgive us. And in this case, the wronged party is God himself.

The question is, does Jesus really have the authority to forgive sin? Does he really have the right to identify himself with Almighty God? Or is Jesus blaspheming, as the religious leaders are quietly thinking to themselves? To answer that question, Jesus does something amazing.

"Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...' He said to the paralytic, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This

amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" (Mark 2:8-12)

As if to illustrate his claim to have God's authority and power, Jesus immediately cures the man's paralysis with a few words. But the healing is not an end in itself; he doesn't do it with a flourish, as if performing magic tricks at a circus. No, he cures this man, and countless others, in order to reveal to us his true identity. He is quite obviously behaving with God's authority and God's power... and he expects us to draw the obvious conclusion.

Mark shows us time and again that Jesus not only claims to have the authority of God, he also displays the power of God as he teaches, heals the sick, calms the storm, raises the dead and forgives sin. He acts in God's world, with God's authority.

Of course, if Jesus is actually God's Son, then it really matters. It gets very personal. Do I recognize who he is?

Will I listen to him as my teacher? Can I acknowledge that he has complete control over the circumstances of my life... over sickness... over nature... and even over my own death?

Can I see that he is the only one with the power and the authority to forgive my sin... or to leave it unforgiven?

Will I recognize him now, while I have the chance? Or will I recognize him later, when it's too late?