

## **Corporate Evensong**

**Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2009**

In the passage we have just heard from St Mark's Gospel the disciples have, as is so often the case, completely failed to grasp the significance of what is going on around them. They have just seen their master feed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread and yet they worry about only having one loaf to share between them. You can imagine a little exasperation in the voice of our Lord as he asks them: "Do you still not understand?" There are doubtless many things which they do not understand but the most basic is what this miracle tells us about the identity of Jesus. The disciples have seen Him heal countless people, cast out demons and walk on water and still they do not yet recognise Him as the Messiah, much less the Son of God.

But what are we to make of the warning "... beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the leaven of Herod."? Once we have dismissed the disciples first thought - that Jesus is talking about food – we quickly recognise leaven as a symbol for something small which nevertheless permeates and changes the character of its surroundings: like a bowl of flour becoming dough. So what does it stand for here? We are, of course, used to hearing the Pharisees criticised for hypocrisy and legalism and might quickly associate Herod with political ambition. These are all vices which we and the disciples would do well to avoid but there is a clue to another interpretation in the previous two verses. The Pharisees have just approached Jesus and asked for a sign. Coming just after the feeding of the four thousand this request seems to us ridiculous and points to the fact that the Pharisees are unable or unwilling to comprehend what is staring them in the face. Herod too hears about Jesus's wonders but for him they are an insignificant curiosity. So we can see the "leaven of the Pharisees" as a kind of obtuseness or hardness of heart: a mindset which prevents them from acknowledging Jesus's divine authority or the witness to it offered by His miracles. The disciples are also in danger of missing the point about who Jesus is and are duly warned by Him.

For us today Christ's words here have a slightly different significance. Mark ensures that we understand who Jesus is far better than the disciples do at this point. Indeed his Gospel opens with Christ's baptism where God Himself identifies Jesus as His "beloved son". However, while we are unlikely to misunderstand our Lord's miracles as spectacularly as the disciples, the warning to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" is still an apposite one.

Today we are surrounded by a view of the world which sees it purely as a system governed by impersonal and immutable physical laws and while this is appropriate in the laboratory it runs the risk of closing our minds to even the possibility of God's action in the world. If we lose sight of the fact that God is intimately involved in His creation here and now: that He is fact the source both of here and of now, then we may find ourselves forever explaining away the delicate hints God gives us of His constant and loving presence. Then Divine activity can cease to be a mysterious yet constant reality in our everyday lives and become instead a series of more or less haphazard interventions, perhaps conveniently confined to the pages of history.

God's ways are certainly inscrutable and His providence is often all but imperceptibly subtle. Let us keep our eyes open to the gentle signs of His presence and listen carefully for the whispering of His voice.