

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 30 Year B 2021

You may or may not have noticed that we have been going on a journey these past weeks with Jesus and disciples. We have been following, step by step, the path Jesus has taken as he has turned his direction toward Jerusalem. And as in so many classic stories, the road has become a school, the place where valuable lessons are imparted. The nearer Jesus comes to his destination the more urgent his lessons have become. There have been no healings, no exorcisms. Jesus has simply taken conversations, encounters, and questions on the way to highlight and expand for his followers his vision of the kingdom. But as Jesus walks with his disciples to Jerusalem, making effort to teach and instruct the disciples, we have seen again and again how they *just don't get it!* In fact, they prove to have not only completely missed the point of it all, they also *obstruct* and *pervert* the unfolding of the kingdom.

So, on this journey while Jesus has said take up your cross and follow me, that the Son of Man must be handed over into the hands of sinners and die, Peter has said, Lord you can't go there, it's too dangerous! Children are brought to Jesus and the disciples push them away, while Jesus holds them up as a model for the Kingdom. The sons of Zebedee excited about the talk of a new kingdom go up to Jesus and ask for seats of honour. But Jesus says, no: that whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant! At every turn in the road, at every lesson, the disciples show themselves *blind and deaf*; unable to comprehend and accept Jesus' vision of the Kingdom.

But the Gospel we encounter today is the end of the journey. The lessons are almost over. School is almost out. This is the last scene in Mark's Gospel before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. While the disciples continue to stumble about in the darkness of their own misunderstandings and lack of faith, it is up to *others* to show the possibilities of life in Christ. In a thread common to all the Gospels, it is those most unlikely, those most on the edge, who can see most clearly God's kingdom breaking though in Christ. After all they have seen and experienced the disciples *remain blind* to what is unfolding before them. But it is blind Bartimaeus, who becomes a model of seeing faith.

Bartimaeus, sitting most likely by the city gate and begging for alms, hears of Jesus' approach and begins to make a commotion. *Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.* The original Greek here is *eleēson me*, beautifully echoing for us the liturgical prayer with which we open our mass: *Kyrie eleison*, 'Lord, have mercy.' Bartimaeus, here, really giving voice to the whole people of God groaning for release, for true sight! Though reprimanded by the crowd, he continues to shout, until Jesus finally calls out to him. Elsewhere remember, Jesus *himself* has sought to silence such acclamations of his identity. But highlighting the significant bridge this story plays - how it is a turning point in the whole Gospel - Jesus *does not* silence this acclamation. While Peter had identified Jesus as the Christ, he had the wrong idea of what that meant. But now, at the threshold of Jerusalem, as Jesus steps towards his Passion, the true nature of Jesus' Messiahship will become clear.

While the crowd try to suppress poor Bartimaeus, nothing will stop him. We notice his vigour and enthusiasm: he throws off his cloak! He jumps up! In the early centuries of the church, those about to be baptised were invited to strip themselves of their clothes, thereby symbolizing their renunciation of their old way of life. St Francis of Assisi in a famous incident from his life enacts the same thing. In Mark's story, the blind man prepares for inner transformation by throwing off the cloak of his old life. But we should note how it is such a *contrast* to the timidity and wishy-washiness of the disciples up to this point.

Again, in a pattern we see throughout the bible, we see God who invites us, beckons us, but never compels us, forces us. So we hear Jesus so simply ask, '*What do you want me to do for you?*' And in one of the most poignant lines in all the gospels, '*Master, that I may see again.*' Remember, this is the *same question* asked of the sons of Zebedee in the gospel from last week! They wanted privilege and glory. What they so badly *needed* but *failed* to ask for, Bartimaeus has no hesitation in asking: to see. This is what we should all be asking for! This is what we *all* truly need. This is what is completely in the power of Jesus to give: for us *to see*. Bartimaeus, then, stands for all spiritual seekers. All who hope against hope that there might be a way to live outside

the tyranny of the self, a way through the darkness of the world about us. Jesus hears this cry, *Go, your faith has made you well*. Curiously, though, he does not ‘go’. Rather we are told, he *followed him on the way*. The disciples had so much difficulty in following Jesus on the road. But Bartimaeus does not hesitate to follow our Lord into Jerusalem, his new faith ready to witness to all that will take place there. The blind beggar becomes, then, a model of discipleship and faith. Throwing off his old life, and receiving the gift Jesus offers, he is able to freely follow Jesus on the way.

The image of blindness and sight is such a powerful spiritual motif. But even in the short story we hear today the Evangelist delights in the richness on offer. And by setting this story against other stories of the gospel - of those who think they see but are in fact blind, (namely the disciples!) - we are once more brought in close to the hard lessons Our Lord seeks to impart. Because, of course, there is part of the ‘blind beggar’ in all of us. From the deep places of our hearts there are cries waiting to be let out: *Jesus, have mercy on me*. Now, Bartimaeus was acutely aware of his need. He knew he could not save himself, that he did not have means to get himself out of his situation. But for many people of faith, we hide from the ‘blind beggar’ in ourselves. We cover it with our busyness or our competence, or by respectability or by simply ignoring or suppressing it. And in doing so we miss out on the possibility of receiving the life that comes by allowing Christ to enter every aspect of our existence, and not just those parts we are happy to put on show.

In the difficult situation we now find ourselves, our numbers limited, our congregation divided, a cloud of fear, nervousness hanging over us, more than ever we should be aware of our need of Christ, of the healing and mercy he brings. Even as we tentatively step toward some sense of ‘normality’ we do so with a heightened degree of vulnerability and fragility, not only personally but also in our shared life. We should be careful to not obstruct or pervert others from their path to true sight. To help us through the tricky path we seek to now navigate, our prayer should be that of Bartimaeus, *that I may see...* And receiving the gift of true sight Christ so freely gives, to then cast of our cloaks of fear and timidity and follow our Lord, even to the gates of Jerusalem. Amen