

Sermon – Blind Bartimaeus

St Paul, Wimbledon Park – 27 October 2018

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

We're all familiar, I'm sure, with the story of Blind Bartimaeus, begging by the roadside on the edge of the city of Jericho, determined to make his voice heard – to make his voice heard by Jesus. Blind Bartimaeus, whose plaintive voice was heard above the clamour of the crowd: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

What did he mean by 'Son of David'? Well, it could mean only one thing: Bartimaeus may have been blind, but he could see that Jesus was the Messiah, the descendant of David, born in David's town, the one they'd been looking and waiting for, for centuries. Bartimaeus somehow grasped who Jesus was, and that gave him hope that he might be helped. And he *persisted* in that hope: though the people around him tried to shut him up, he cried out even louder, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

And of course, people told him to be quiet, and the disciples too probably told him to be quiet. But the disciples weren't bodyguards like a modern politician surrounds himself with; the people were able get near to Jesus, and he was able to reach out and touch them, and they were able to reach out and touch him.

Just as our blind beggar, Bartimaeus, or Son of Timaeus, was able to reach Jesus. Bartimaeus who was sitting by the roadside as he always did – the only thing he could do: the only way he could make a living was to beg; and we're told specifically it was a large crowd, and there must have been a lot of chattering and clamouring, and argument about who Jesus was, and yet – Jesus

heard Bartimaeus's shout, and ... stood still ... and called for him. ... And the people in the crowd said to him, 'Take heart; get up, he's calling you.'

Not only was Bartimaeus persistent, but he fully expected *transformation*. There's a nice little detail that the Gospel writers give us, and that is that Jesus doesn't go over to him as we might expect, but he stands still: he tells the people to bring Bartimaeus to him. So the very people who have been trying to keep him quiet now have to invite him to come forward. And we're told that he *sprang up*; and St Mark gives us another little detail here, that he *threw his cloak aside* – surely, a strange thing for a blind man to do: surely, most people who are visually challenged would want to keep their things near them. But Bartimaeus knows that something great is going to happen; he throws off his cloak. What does that mean? The cloak seems to stand for his place in society (and a beggar's place is no place); the begging cloak was his badge of office, his meal ticket, showing that he was unable to earn a living like others could. Jesus asks what he wants, and when he says, respectfully but simply, 'My Teacher, let me see again', Jesus says, 'Go; *your faith* has made you well.' His *faith*; blind faith we might call it, the certainty that he would be made whole again. Bartimaeus couldn't see Jesus, but he knew that he could be helped. He knew he could be healed.

So Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, the only covering that he had, and his only security in his vulnerable existence; he risked losing even that in the crowd, because he had the faith that Jesus would be able to make him see.

And the third detail in the story is that Jesus asked him what he wanted Jesus to do for him, and the man answered, 'Let me see again.' Bartimaeus was a beggar, and so he might have said that he wanted money. 'Have pity on me' could have meant, 'Can you

give me the price of a cup of tea?’ But the beggar’s reply, that he wanted his sight back, is an expression of faith that Jesus is able to deal with the root of his problem, and not merely with the symptom. And that’s why Jesus says to him, ‘Your faith has cured you.’

Bartimaeus throwing off his cloak might remind us of St Paul, who tells us to put off the old nature and to put away falsehood. The word is the one used for changing your clothes. Becoming a Christian must involve a change of life, and the first Christians compared this to taking off dirty old clothes, and putting on clean, new ones. In the baptism service we say to the baby in his lovely family baptism garment, ‘You have been clothed with Christ. As many as are baptized have put on Christ.’ The early Christians also used the symbolism of blindness or darkness, and sight or light. The baptism service again: ‘In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light ... You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life.’ Bartimaeus in the gospel is a picture of someone who has done what he must do: he has passed from ignorance and darkness to the truth.

Our problem as human beings is that too often we’d rather live in the familiar falsehood of the old ways than come to the truth which Jesus offers. Sin is self-deception, and it works through creating a smoke-screen of lies, which we fall for; we make assumptions about life, and we *like it* that way.

The prophets saw this too: they could see that people preferred a religion that allowed them to remain as they were, offering sacrifices instead of changing their ways. The justice, kindness and humility that God requires, are too demanding for most of us, most of the time. We would rather go on begging, in our cloaks, than come to the truth and ask for sight.

We all know people who won't ask for help with their problems, because they can't admit to themselves that their problems have become bigger than they are. We all know people who are so depressed that they won't ask for help, as they've convinced themselves that there's no help available for someone so depressed as they are.

There are times when we all need help, times when if we are to survive, if we are to live, if we are to go grow, when we must turn to God and perhaps also to other people, asking for what we need. As did blind Bartimaeus. He reached out to for help to someone he knew could help, he reached out to someone he hoped and prayed would help. It's a hard thing to do, this asking, a difficult thing, a humbling thing, but there are times when we all need help, times when we must turn to other people and to God, or stay in our circumstances, whatever they are.

The good news is that there is no situation in life that's so bad that someone can't help us with it, that someone can't help us to overcome it, or to bear it with a hope and a strength that transforms it, and us, completely. And where we don't know who to go to, we can go to God, and find the help we need. God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we have in mind, but God *does* answer them in a way that's appropriate; God always gives us what we need, and God always gives us strength to bear what we must bear. 'Come unto me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened to you. Ask – and you shall receive.' These are the promises Jesus made, promises that he kept time and time again, promises that are still valid.

Many commentators on today's Gospel reading from Mark note how blind Bartimaeus could see more, blind, than many people can see with their sight. They note how Bartimaeus saw Jesus as

someone who could help him, how he saw Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah. and how, in that seeing, wasn't afraid to ask Jesus for what he needed.

But what strikes me even more about blind Bartimaeus is that he not only saw Jesus as one who could help him and had the faith to ask for that help, but that after he was helped – and told to go his own way – he had the faith to follow Jesus. He was dismissed: 'Go your way', Jesus said. 'Your faith has made you well.' But he didn't go his own way; we're told that he followed Jesus on the way.

We must learn from blind Bartimaeus that we never need to be afraid to ask for help. We never need to be afraid to turn to our friends and neighbours and share our needs; we must never be afraid to turn to God, who'll show us where to find help. We must never be afraid to ask, and after asking, follow Jesus, that perfect high priest, on the way.

Then we'll find the truth in that promise we heard from the prophet Jeremiah:

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labour, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to my people Israel.*

Amen!