

Blind Bartimaeus

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 28 October 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Mk: 10:46-52

Lord Jesus. May the light of your words shine in our hearts and bring us new lights and new life in your name we pray, Amen.

The early church often talked about the Christian faith as "The Way".

It conveyed this idea of faith as a journey as a pilgrimage as something dynamic and moving, something that was lived out in the real world. And of course that's something where none of us has actually finally arrived at our destination. And this story of Bartimaeus, the blind Beggar begins and ends with 'The Way'. At the beginning, Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside (in the Greek, 'para tēn hodon' - 'by the way'). At the roadside - at the side and not actually on it.

Bartimaeus as it seems is not yet a follower of Jesus. He is not yet a disciple. He hasn't yet embraced the idea of following this man Jesus and he is not yet on 'The Way'. Despite being blind, he is a mere observer, a spectator if you like on the sidelines. And maybe there is a connection there. Maybe he is blind because he is a mere observer and unwilling to commit. But by the end of the story we're told Bartimaeus followed Jesus 'en tē hodō' – 'on the way'; he's no longer at the roadside, he's a fellow traveller with the disciples and part of the fledgling church. He's made a commitment, no longer cynical and detached, he's made a move taken a risk and offered his life.

So this story of blind Bartimaeus isn't just a nice miracle story about how Jesus healed a poor blind man. It's a story about discipleship. About what it takes to become a Christian, a follower of Jesus and if you like, you and I are invited to stand in the place of Bartimaeus this morning. His story could be your story and mine.

This theme of discipleship fits very well within the context of Mark's gospel and chapters 8 to 10 of the Gospel in particular focus on aspects of Christian discipleship.

The section both begins and ends with stories about Jesus healing people who are blind. Which suggests that the blindness is a metaphor for something else - for ignorance or unbelief. It's a spiritual condition quite as much as a physical one. And within this section of Mark's gospel there are other stories and other would-be disciples, who stand in direct contrast to Bartimaeus.

In particular there's a story earlier in chapter 10 which we looked at a couple of weeks ago about the rich man. In that story and that of Bartimaeus, Jesus is just starting a journey but is willing to be interrupted. So in both stories Jesus shows hospitality and generosity of spirit not minding that his journey is being delayed and his plans disrupted. The rich man comes to Jesus and says "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He wants to do something on his own account, to stay in control, to keep the initiative. Bartimaeus in contrast just cries out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Bartimaeus is helpless, open, trusting; he's willing for Jesus to have the initiative. He doesn't wish to determine what's going to happen next, unlike the rich man.

The rich man calls Jesus 'good teacher', which is respectful but rather noncommittal. Bartimaeus on the other hand calls 'Jesus, Son of David', a messianic title identifying Jesus as someone uniquely placed in God's purposes. It was also a political title and one of the reasons why the disciples want to shush Bartimaeus and stop him from making such a noise isn't because they're worried about him making a nuisance of himself and being disruptive. It's because they're worried that the Romans are going to overhear. They're saying shush! They're going to hear; they're going to think that your calling Jesus some kind of nationalist resistance leader, a king of the Jews". Which of course is the eventual accusation for which Jesus is crucified.

So Bartimaeus isn't afraid to take a risk in naming Jesus. He sees him as a national liberator someone who has come to set them free. And the rich man comes and kneels before Jesus, without asking anyone - he just barges in. Bartimaeus waits to be invited by Jesus personally. "Call him here", Jesus says. When Jesus invites the rich man to follow him after getting rid of his possessions, the rich man doesn't want to take up the invitation but goes away shocked and grieving because his possessions were too many and too important to him. The only possession

Bartimaeus has his cloak and we're told that he actually throws it off and leaves it behind in order to come to Jesus.

Those who have little, it seems, have little to lose in following Jesus. And the rich man has no need of healing. It's not mentioned as a component in the story. Certainly nothing that he will admit to. Bartimaeus on the other hand is all too aware of his helplessness. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me". But Jesus invites him to be more specific - "What do you want me to do for you?"

The need may be obvious but Bartimaeus still has to name it and take responsibility for it: "My teacher, let me see again". Bartimaeus makes a connection between his blindness and Jesus's ministry as a rabbi, a teacher. His blindness is the blindness of ignorance, of unbelief and of alienation and it can be repealed by receiving enlightenment and understanding in the presence of Christ. His seeing is the sight of faith: seeing Jesus for who he truly is, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the one who has come to set his people free. And in the light of that faith Bartimaeus also comes to a fuller understanding of who he himself is as a child of God.

There is another contrast in chapters eight to 10 between Bartimaeus, to whom Jesus says "What do you want me to do for you?" and the disciples James and John who a little bit earlier come to Jesus saying "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you". These immature disciples think Jesus will do whatever they want. And their desire is for power and glory. Bartimaeus just wants to see the truth and so be set free by it.

The only people in Chapter 10 of Mark who are at all like Bartimaeus are the children, who a little bit earlier the disciples, just like Bartimaeus, are trying to shush and keep away from Jesus. But Jesus recognises that the children can enter the Kingdom of God in a way that adults find difficult. Because children know how to trust; they know how to receive God's kingdom as a gift, not as a right or a reward. Just as Bartimaeus receives his sight, not as a right or reward, but as a straightforward gift of grace.

So I wonder how readily you can identify with Bartimaeus this morning? Are you aware of suffering in some sense from spiritual blindness?

Are you aware of your inability to manage by yourself? Of your difficulty to be the person you think you should be? Your struggle to be a better person or even a better Christian?

I wonder do you recognise Bartimaeus' cry of desperation? The way he calls out to Jesus without holding anything back; without worrying about his dignity or about what he thinks he can contribute to the encounter; without making any attempts to justify himself or to place Jesus under any obligation.

I wonder can you identify with Bartimaeus' reckless faith? - "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

And I wonder whether you might be drawn by the sheer attractiveness of Jesus in this story? I'm struck by his willingness to be interrupted and to give Bartimaeus and perhaps you this morning his whole attention.

When I am hailed by beggars in the street, I'm afraid there's an inclination to my heart to sink and to think "Oh no! They're going to ask me for money". You know, let's quicken the pace, let's move away, let's get out of the picture.

Jesus doesn't do that. He's ready to be accosted. Ready for an encounter however uncomfortable it might be. Ready to open himself to perhaps an unforeseen outcome.

And I'm struck by his openness and his refusal to judge Bartimaeus and I wonder are you caught by Jesus's invitation? "Call him here". Does it make your heart jump? The thought that Jesus wants you closer, nearer, more fully in his presence? Are you amazed by the generosity of his question to Bartimaeus and to you - "What do you want me to do for you?" What is your deepest desire? What will bring light and sunshine and illumination into your life? He's offering you the gift of sight to see what God is like, to behold the fullness of his love, to see what you yourself have been made for.

And I wonder if you've noticed in this story the role of the church? That there are other people involved in all of this. There's somebody else who tells Bartimaeus that Jesus is near, otherwise he wouldn't have known. And there's somebody else who tells Bartimaeus "He's calling you. Take heart. Get up come forward". There's somebody else offering an invitation and encouragement. The church has a role in

this in telling people, telling one another, "The Lord is near, take heart, come forward, draw near, take advantage of this opportunity". It may be the only one you've got. And we're told that Bartimaeus having received his sight, followed Jesus on the way.

Perhaps he was able to do for others what had been done for him, to say "Jesus is near, take heart, draw near".

And I wonder perhaps you and I might do that as well, to respond to the invitation to come forward in humble trust, to receive our sight, our spiritual sight by faith and then to be equipped to tell others that the Lord is near and is inviting them to come close.

And I'm struck by the words of the hymn that we sang:-

*I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk,
Till trav'ling days are done.*