

Sermon for 27th October 2024, Year B, Proper 24

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

Mark 10:46-end

Sermon

At first *sight* – if you see what I did there – the healing of blind Bartimaeus is just one more healing miracle in the story of Jesus’s ministry. But there’s so much more going on here than immediately meets the eye.

It should be obvious from my first paragraph just how frequently metaphors around sight and seeing are used to convey wisdom or understanding or spiritual insight, both in ancient Greek and in modern English. ‘Do you see?’ means ‘do you understand?’, and to have ‘seen the light’ means to have received wisdom. Conversely, those who are ignorant are often described as ‘blind to the truth’ or even ‘in darkness’, and even though this metaphor does have very unfortunate and undeserved negative associations for those who are literally blind, there’s no question that it is used throughout Christian scripture – and our gospel reading today is no exception. Even as the story describes the straightforward healing of Bartimaeus’s eyesight, it also intentionally draws attention to the continuing spiritual blindness of most of those following Jesus on his last journey towards Jerusalem.

In this case, Mark’s gospel somewhat unsubtly contrasts the lack of understanding of his senior disciples James and John with the faith of the blind beggar on the road. Just a few short verses ago, in last weeks’ gospel reading, we heard Jesus say to James and John, “What is it you want me to do for you?” to which they responded by asking for the places of highest honour in God’s kingdom – a request that showed their continuing ignorance of the humble loving service expected to flow from the hearts of true spiritual leaders. Now, Jesus

asks the same question of Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” and Bartimaeus, in contrast, simply asks to see again.

It surely cannot be coincidence that these two requests follow each other in the text.

The disciples are insiders who apparently want to preserve and enhance their power and importance, perhaps under the guise of protecting Jesus’s honour. The beggar, in contrast, is a suffering outsider whose request is forged out of loss, exclusion and helplessness. Jesus chastises the self-righteous insiders and brings the outsider into the centre of the story. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Over and over again, Jesus makes this point, and still, no one quite understands it.

The large crowd following Jesus towards his destiny in Jerusalem are also still struggling to see and understand what Jesus is really about. Their first reaction to Bartimaeus’s cries are to tell him to shut up. They too have been sucked into believing that Jesus somehow belongs to them and not to these annoying outsiders vying for Jesus’s attention along the way – no doubt forgetting that they too were almost certainly recently outsiders whom everyone else ignored or disdained.

Perhaps in their mind, the stigma of Bartimaeus’s disability, or his dishonourable trade of begging justified his being kept away from the holy rabbi. Or perhaps the crowd are simply in a hurry to get to Jerusalem just a few short miles further along the road, where they believe Jesus is going to start his rebellion against the Romans. From that perspective the blind man is frankly useless, just a tiresome burden, a pointless delay. Why waste time with more healings if you’re about to arrive in the capital like a conquering hero? Palm Sunday is coming in just a few verses when Jesus will lead the procession into Jerusalem on a donkey. The king is arriving to throw off the chains of our oppression! Hosanna! Hosanna! Let the useless beggars get out of the way and be silent.

But Jesus isn't that sort of king, so he stops the grand parade just outside Jericho and asks for Bartimaeus to be called to him. Suddenly all the hangers-on who had moments ago been telling Bartimaeus to shut up are now crying out with excited encouragement, "Take heart, get up, he is calling you!"

Jesus, who must surely have noticed this hypocrisy, does not criticise his followers' blindness to human need, but includes them in the ministry that is about to occur. Those who wanted to reject and exclude are now the very people Jesus invites to call out a welcome to Bartimaeus. Simply by being in Jesus' company, they are unknowingly being drawn into the love that characterises God's kingdom and their hearts start to be transformed.

Ironically, Bartimaeus is the first person in Mark's gospel to recognise Jesus as 'Son of David' – a supposed key characteristic of the prophesied Messiah. In this sense, the last person Jesus heals is the first to see something that everyone else in Mark's Gospel is blind to.

The story of Bartimaeus also differs from the typical pattern in Mark's gospel in that after being healed, Bartimaeus immediately joins Jesus on his journey rather than being sent away and asked to keep silent about the experience. Bartimaeus seems to have greater insight about who and what Jesus is than other recipients of his divine healing, and nothing can stop him from joining the happy throng.

Even before he has approached Jesus, Bartimaeus has already thrown off his cloak – probably his most important or even only possession, his only security and warmth on cold nights. It may not have been valuable in monetary terms, but it shows us the image of someone who was immediately willing to lay aside everything he had when Jesus called him. This is perhaps why Jesus heals him with a simple word: "Go, your faith has made you well."

The irony is that Bartimaeus is joining the crew just as Jesus is about to enter the city where he will be rejected, where he will refuse to defend himself to the

authorities, where he will suffer and be put on a Cross to die. None of his followers expect or understand this – neither the first disciples, nor even the last. They all think they see the truth of Jesus the Messiah, but they will not fully understand him until they see him on the Cross, and it's only in his death and resurrection that they realise just how blind they have truly been.

Of course, the modern church is not immune to making all the same mistakes as those confused first followers of Jesus. No matter how good we feel we are at making sure everyone is included and welcomed as part of a church community, there are always some people we each find challenging or uncomfortable to be around, who we might, if we're honest, wish that Jesus did not keep inviting into 'our' community. But these are the very people through whom God softens and transforms our hearts. It's the slightly awkward people who don't quite fit who challenge and encourage us to continually expand our compassion and empathy. If church were only full of people just like us who were easy and comfortable to include, then how swiftly our hearts might become rigid and cold, as we cling to our cloaks, confident that we see, when in fact we are still quite blind to the vulnerable and irrepressible love to which Jesus is always calling us.