

Last Sunday after Trinity 2024

Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-end)

A Sermon by Mark Willis, Lay Reader

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

As a rule, I don't like waffle. If something needs to be said, I prefer it to be said simply and clearly. If what is said is interesting, or if more context or explanation is required, I will ask for more detail. If I don't ask for further detail, then it is not required.

The story of Bartimaeus' encounter with Jesus is short and simple. Contained in just 7 verses, there is no waffle in sight. From this short passage, we observe once again that a day spent in the life of Jesus is never dull, particularly when there is an encounter with ordinary people such as ourselves. I find myself wanting to know more about this encounter with Bartimaeus.

The encounter took place in Jericho which is located in the Jordan valley, between the Jordan river 6 miles to the east and Jerusalem 18 miles to the west. Jericho was a popular resort city, so there would have been plenty of people travelling along this route.

Bartimaeus was blind. We are not told if Bartimaeus had been blind from birth or as the result of an illness or accident, but we do know that blindness was regarded as a divine punishment for sin. As a consequence, Bartimaeus was all too well aware that he was a sinner, an outcast in his own community. Unable to work, Bartimaeus needed to beg to sustain his household. This busy route between Jericho and Jerusalem was a good place for someone who needed to beg.

Between Jericho and Jerusalem lies the town of Bethany. Not long before this particular day, and in full public view, Jesus had raised Lazarus from his grave. We can assume with some confidence that credible witnesses would have brought word of this to Jericho and be overheard by Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus came to realise that Jesus was much more than just a person from a small village called Nazareth.

So when Bartimaeus learns that Jesus of Nazareth is part of the throng passing by his position, Bartimaeus calls out 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'. Son of David was a description reserved for the coming Messiah, a coming Messiah embedded within the prophecy of Isaiah. Bartimaeus surrenders himself entirely to the authority of Jesus. He asks for nothing other than forgiveness.

Bartimaeus is prepared to fight for his mercy and shouts as loudly as is needed to be heard above the noise from the throng of people. Like Bartimaeus, but with the added benefit of subsequent events, we too know that we are sinners, and we too know that Jesus is the Son of God, who has died for our sins and who invites us to seek his merciful forgiveness. I wonder how loudly we are shouting above the noise for his mercy.

Jesus of course responds through the noise. 'Bring him to me' he says. Bartimaeus needs no second invitation. He flings off his cloak and jumps to his feet to be brought before Jesus, the creator of the universe, the Son of God.

Last week we heard Jesus say to his disciples 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve'. He spoke of himself as the servant King. The gospel retells constantly how it is always in Jesus' nature to help those in need. And so Jesus' question to Bartimaeus is no surprise. 'What do you want me to do?' What can I Jesus do for you Bartimaeus? Bartimaeus asks to see.

Our usual experience of sight is that physically it weakens as we age or weakens as a consequence of illness. But our sight also becomes more discerning as we age. We learn to see more of what surrounds us. We notice creation more. We notice those who are less privileged than ourselves. We understand more.

I have often looked at the painting in our vestry of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, hours before his cruel ordeal at Calvary, being supported by an angel. I remember a wall painting in the Holy Land of Jesus on the cross with an endless line of angels praying for him. Two weeks ago in a church in Northumberland we came across a poster that said 'It is not the nails that held Jesus on the cross, but his love for us'. I was abruptly aware that at any point in his ordeal, Jesus could have been rescued by his angels. He didn't have to endure his shaming and crucifixion, yet he chose to. For

each of us. I had not been seeing and appreciating the full significance of Jesus' death 2000 years ago.

When Jesus says to Bartimaeus 'Go, your faith has healed you', immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. Scholars of Greek will point out that the Greek word used for healing us is the same word used for saving us. Bartimaeus's faith has saved him and healed him.

As an ordinary person, Bartimaeus is unusual in being named in the bible. Bartimaeus is mentioned not because he has become one of many people who have physical sight, but because he saw who Jesus really is, and did what Jesus asked him to do – to seek forgiveness. Bartimaeus is named because he became a recognised disciple of Jesus, a person that early readers of Mark's gospel would know. And shortly after this interaction with Jesus he would follow Jesus into Jerusalem and to Calvary.

It may only be a short story about Bartimaeus, but he started his ordinary day as a beggar by the roadside and finished it walking with Jesus along the road to life. It is a simple outcome that we ordinary people can emulate on any ordinary day in our lives. The story is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.