

## The gift of sight

Sun 25 October, 2015

*A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, the Revd Dr Ruth Redpath.*

*Reading: Mark 10:46-52*

We have just listened to one of those feel-good stories of Jesus healing a blind man – someone with a disability which evokes our profound sympathy. It is a story familiar to me from my youngest days, as it may be for others of you, as it so readily lends itself to dramatization at Children's Services! There was a part for everyone - however many people were present. *Perhaps you were visualising such, even as it was read.*

**Jesus is on a journey towards Jerusalem** and sets out on the 25 or so kilometre journey from Jericho – a hot and dusty town –accompanied by a crowd buzzing with excitement because the teacher/healer has been in town. By the roadside, sitting in the dust, on his own, begging, is a blind man, himself dusty and sweaty, isolated physically and socially by his disability. With his heightened sensitivity to sound, he hears the approaching crowd and discovers from snippets of the animated conversation that Jesus is the reason for the excitement. One imagines he could have already heard of Jesus and his healing powers, because he promptly starts shouting out to catch the attention of Jesus.

Uncomfortable with such a confronting intrusion into their happy procession, people around tell him to shut up - in no uncertain terms.

But, undeterred, he calls even more loudly. This time Jesus hears, **STANDS STILL** and gets some of those nearby to call him over. When Jesus asks "What do you want from me?" His answer is simple - "Let me see". Without mention of any other action than the word of Jesus, his sight is immediately restored.

Wonderful – Jesus has healed another person, another marginalised person in need. Here is another episode revealing the power of Jesus, as Son of God.

But there is more to it. There were some details of the story which I have omitted. While they are not germane to the story itself, **it could be** that they have been included deliberately.

As you know, this year Mark's gospel is the source of most of our readings. Spread out over the year as they are, and in small bites, we can miss some of the impact and import. Reading the gospel as a whole, we might discover, in the incidents he has selected, the purpose for their inclusion.

Our story today is the last paragraph of a central section of two and a half chapters which open the second half of the book. The very next verse begins with Palm Sunday and the remaining chapters tell the story leading to Good Friday and Easter Day.

These central chapters take place in the context of a journey - the intentional journey of Jesus to Jerusalem - but another journey is taking place. Jesus is trying to take the disciples on a journey of heart and mind - to prepare them for what lies ahead.

After a conversation demonstrating their confusion, Jesus has said to them, in apparent frustration "Do you still not perceive or understand? Do you have eyes and fail to see?"

So it is that Mark follows with some episodes in which the disciples are challenged to a deeper understanding of where this journey will take them.

- Jesus asks them who they really think he is? Having voiced their dawning perception that Jesus is the Messiah, Peter cannot stomach what Jesus tells them that means - that he is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

Then -

- Peter, James and John witness the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop - a scene where they glimpse the glory of that Messiah, the beloved Son of God. Returning to the everyday from that overwhelming experience, Jesus again reminds them of the suffering ahead. But, says Mark, **they didn't understand**.
- We read that they try to silence an exorcist who is not one of them.
- The ordinary people bring Jesus little children to be touched and blest. The disciples try to prevent this, but Jesus gives those little ones his full attention.

And so it goes on.

- We have the story of the Rich young Ruler who wants to follow Jesus, but when faced with the idea that his dependence for his identity on his possessions is holding him back from wholehearted discipleship, he turns away.
- Finally, just before today's episode, James & John come to Jesus with a request. Yes says Jesus - "What do you want me to do for you?" What they ask for is the most important place in the coming kingdom.

We can almost hear Jesus sighing **Do they still not see, do they still not understand?** Again he can only explain that his kingdom is not like that. It is a kingdom characterised by humility and sacrifice and service of others.

Now, reaching the story of the blind man, we might see some links with what has gone before, - because - as commentators note, there must be some significance in placing this story - a story not too different from other healing stories - **at this point** - so close to the events of what we call Holy Week.

Just as Jesus had rebuked the sternness of the disciples and interrupted his activities to welcome the children, on this occasion, he halts his journey when, as stern attempts are made to silence the blind man, he hears his desperate cries, cries from one who cannot find his way to Jesus by himself, **and gives him his full attention**.

Asks Jesus "What do you want me to do for you?" - the same question as he posed to James & John. This man's one request is, not a plea for guarantees of special preferment, rather a simple plea for mercy and healing.

He has no wealth or status - in stark contrast to the rich young ruler who found the call to give away everything he valued too hard. Rather, the blind man, like so many others whom Jesus healed, is on the outskirts of society, yet senses from what he has heard, by the quiet personal attention he has received, even while Jesus is surrounded by an excited crowd, that he doesn't fit the stereotype of an important person with no time for children or beggars.

Though he can't see the face of Jesus, he discerns from the call for him to come a loving personal concern - something rare in his experience as an outcast - and addresses him as Son of David and Teacher.

You may have noticed that, so far, I haven't used his name - Bartimaeus it is, Bartimaeus - son of Timaeus. It happens that this is the only healing story in the four gospels where the one healed is given a name. We may wonder why.

It may have been that his name was included because he was still known in the Christian community where this gospel was to be read.

*But there is another possibility. Did you notice the use of the word **call**? Jesus heard the cries of Bartimaeus and asked people nearby to “**Call** him Here” They **called** him, so we are told, and said to Bartimaeus kindly, Take heart, he is **CALLING** you.*

This man, though physically blind, provides a vivid contrast with the disciples whom Jesus **called** and whose names the gospels record. Bartimaeus discerned in his heart, he SAW, he understood who was before him, the one who had **called him** and who was offering him mercy and sight, was one for whom it was worth putting aside everything to follow.

Just as Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John left their nets when Jesus said, “Follow me”, just as Matthew got up from the table in his tax booth when Jesus said “Follow me”, Bartimaeus, having received a call from Jesus, threw aside his cloak, **his one possession - the sign of his occupation** - generally thought to be what he would use as he sat by the roadside begging (*just like a beggar on the pavement in Swanston Street might do*) to receive any passing offerings of small change. He didn't need that cloak any more. He was leaving behind his past life, and everything associated with it.

Says the last sentence of our reading “Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. “

“The Way” -

One can't help but imagine him - joining with those who accompanied Jesus as he continued on the way to Jerusalem in the following week - - and becoming a witness to those terrible events. For Mark's readers, however, that expression “the Way” would have meant more. It was a term used in the early Church for those who had become Christian believers. Paul himself, before his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ, sought permission to arrest any who **belonged to The Way - men or women.**

Who do you identify with in this story?

What part would you see yourself taking in this drama?

One of the crowd looking on?

One of those irritated and discomfited by the cries of the helpless dirty man at the roadside?

Perhaps one of those who gladly conveyed Jesus' message to come to his side?

Or one of the disciples bewildered as to where this journey was taking them and what it seemed to involve?

This story gives us an opportunity to take stock – to see where we sit in our journey of discipleship.

You may be on the periphery of things, unsure, needing to come closer to Jesus and to take him more seriously.

You may want to follow more closely, but are fearful of what total commitment might mean in terms of relationships and lifestyle and vocation.

Sadly there may be some who detect deep within an attitude which fears the presence of those who are different, who want the church to be a comfortable place, where one's senses are not disturbed by the unattractive.

Or are you one so grateful for the welcome you have received that it is your delight to share the good news of welcome for all with others?

Just as Jesus persisted with his fragile disciples, Jesus never gives up on us. His arms of mercy and healing are ever open. We are never beyond his reach.

Perhaps you feel a bit like Bartimaeus - not perhaps with a physical problem but with a sense of inadequacy, of incompleteness, even of failure, something that is preventing you from being the person you want to be.

May I suggest that you put yourself, like him, at the side of the road. Jesus is going to pass by. Reach out and begin to ask for the healing and wholeness and friendship that he offers and which he so readily gives and be prepared to follow him.

May God give us each grace to follow God's call to be his servants whatever it takes and wherever it leads.