

SERMON ORDINARY TIME 30B BIRKENHEAD

Reverend Jordan Greatbatch

We have been talking a lot about healing recently. Last week was the feast of St Luke the Physician, and this week we continue that theme with the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus. If there is one thing then that we know well from the scriptures, it is the healing stories of Jesus. You may have noticed that they often always follow a similar pattern. Someone has a problem, there is something that complicates matters, Jesus cures the person, the result is confirmed, and then there is some response to the miracle. Within our passage today and elsewhere in Mark's Gospel, however, are indicators that the Gospel writer has more in mind than just miracles stories. Our passage today is not simply a healing story, but is also a call story, and Bartimaeus is an example of a disciple.

We get an indication that there is more to the story than just healing by the fact that Mark has already reported the healing of a blind man two chapters back. You may know the story. Jesus arrives in the town of Bethsaida. Some people bring a blind man to him and beg him to touch him.

So Jesus takes the blind man by the hand and leads him out of the village; where he proceeds to put saliva on his eyes and lay his hands on him. The interesting thing is that the man can only see partiality, saying that 'people look like trees', so Jesus lays hands on his eyes again and his sight is fully restored.

So when we read today's story we wonder does the reader really need another healing account to confirm that Jesus can restore sight? In the other story, however, there is the odd detail that after Jesus' first attempt to heal the man, he sees imperfectly and Jesus needs to act again in order for him to see correctly.

I do not think the Bartimaeus story is told to let us know that Jesus has somehow improved his restorations. Rather, it is a way of indicating that while gaining full sight is something that takes time, so does full insight about Jesus' identity take some development. It speaks of the fact that faith development. It isn't just about flicking on a switch and suddenly being in the light, the Christian life takes time as we learn to be disciples. That is why I have to admit I am

often frustrated when Christianity is boiled down to one simple action. For example what is sometimes known as the ‘the Salvation prayer’.

It goes something like this: All I have to do to have Jesus save me from my sins is say “Jesus I am sorry, come into my heart.” Finish. Now do not get me wrong, there is an element of goodwill in this prayer, but what it can do is whittle the Christian life down to one short sentence, ignoring the journey of faith and our participation in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Eucharist.

It can make faith into a quick transaction, and it is often tied in with some sort of ticket out of eternal damnation, certainly not something most of would agree with or be comfortable with. Instead, in today’s passage we have someone who is not passive in his pursuit for truth, but in fact actively chases it. For Bartimaeus upon hearing of Jesus’s passing by, cry’s out “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Here we have Bartimaeus displaying insight into Jesus’ identity that will become clearer to the reader as the Gospel progresses.

So what is the practical outcome for Bartimaeus for acknowledging Jesus as he truly is and for believing in Jesus and his mercy? He gains his sight, and, more importantly, he follows Jesus. It is not just the restoring of physical sight, but also insight into the nature of Jesus. So here is where the call aspect of this story becomes clear. In the other call stories in Mark, “following” Jesus is crucial -- crucial in terms of being important. Simon, Andrew, James, and John are all called to follow Jesus (1:16-20) as is Levi the tax collector (2:14). The rich man in 10:17-21 is told to sell all and follow Jesus. Regarding his disciples, Jesus is explicit in Mark 8:34, “Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Most important, at the end of this account, we do not find a typical reaction to a healing miracle where often the person involved or the crowd are struck with awe and praise. Instead, we are only told that, “Immediately he regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.” (10:50) And where is this way headed? In the very next passage we find Jesus entering Jerusalem and starting the chain of events that will end up at the Easter Mystery. Bartimaeus truly exemplifies the disciple who sees where the way ahead leads and yet follows and believes Jesus. Bartimaeus typifies the

Christian journey, acknowledging that there isn't one point where we 'make it' but it is instead a lifelong striving to be more loving, more open, and more willing to follow the Jesus who welcomes the ostracised, the tax collector and the outsider. Following that Jesus is about accepting our collective humanity, our propensity to fail, but also our great potential to love and show compassion.

Bartimaeus shows us that true sight is not just physical, but spiritual, and offers us an example of a disciple on the road, ever growing, ever exploring the possibilities of God's love.