

Sermon - following Jesus in the Way

Based on the readings: Hebrews 7.21–28; Mark 10.46–52

The journey back to Jerusalem

- In our journeying with Jesus through the narrative of Mark's gospel account, we come now to a significant story: the healing of blind Bartimaeus.
- Even more so than other stories, treating this merely as a healing miracle would miss the relevance this has for the church community - both those that Mark was writing for, and for us today.
- There is a lot of detail worth reflecting on in these seven short verses, but the first aspect is its place in the overall narrative.
- I will start by reminding you of what I had highlighted in last Sunday's sermon, which picked up on the passage immediate prior to today's.
- The starting point comes from midway through chapter 8, when Jesus asks the disciples travelling with him, "Who do you say that I am?", and Peter responds, "You are the Messiah."
- Jesus is at the farthest distance from Jerusalem that he is described as travelling to, and now he turns to head back.
- From now on until he enters Jerusalem in triumph, he is focussed on teaching his disciples about Christ-like leadership.
- Before this pivotal point, Jesus gave priority to making the kingdom of God manifest - not only for those in need, but also as part of teaching his followers about the kingdom of God.
- Once he sets his face toward Jerusalem, to undergo the suffering, death and resurrection that he predicts awaits him, his focus changes.
- While he continues to make the kingdom of God manifest in his interactions with others, he gives priority to training his disciples to enact the kind of leadership he models - the leadership of sacrificial love.

Jericho

- And so Jesus arrives at Jericho.
- Today, Jericho is in the West Bank of Palestine.
- For the Jews in Jesus' day it was symbolically significant as the point of entry into the Promised Land.
- In the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible, Moses led God's people out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and after forty years there learning how to be a nation in their own right, they crossed the Jordan into the land God had promised to their forebears.
- The first city they encountered, which was effectively blocking them from taking ownership of the region, was Jericho.
- Joshua, successor to Moses as the leader of the Israelites, was divinely inspired with a plan to defeat the city's inhabitants.
- After executing the plan over a week, the Israelites conquered Jericho, sparing Rahab the prostitute, who had helped the Israeli spies.
- As a matter of interest, Rahab became the great great grandmother of King David.
- The point of being reminded of this story about Jericho, was that Jericho became a potent symbol as the entry point into the Promised Land - and thus for us, symbolically representing the point of entry into God's kingdom.
- Perhaps for Jesus, and definitely for many Christians subsequently, the Israelite Kingdom of David was a physical symbol of the spiritual kingdom of God.
- So on his journey back to Jerusalem, Jesus symbolically re-enacts the journey of God's people, journeying from Jericho as the symbolic gateway into God's kingdom, to the symbolic centre of that kingdom, to Jerusalem.

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- This physical setting helps provide the symbolic context for Jesus' interaction with the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus.

Contrast with the rich man, and disciples

- Some of the preceding stories also inform the teaching context of this story.
- Two Sundays ago we heard of the man who had many possessions, who came to Jesus, and asked for guidance to be able to experience eternal life - that is, life in all its fullness.
- Jesus told him that he had to give up his possessions, and called the man to follow him.
- However, the man could not let go of his possessions, because he had many, and he could not respond to Jesus' call.
- Bartimaeus only possesses a cloak, in addition to his ordinary clothes, and yet he willingly leaves even that behind when Jesus calls him:

Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

- While the rich man could not enter the kingdom of God, here the blind man with very little leaves even that behind in his enthusiasm to gain entry to eternal life.
- Last Sunday we heard of the disciples being blind to Jesus' teaching about the role of God's Anointed One in enacting sacrificial love, and they are focused on what their positions of status might be.
- When James and John approach Jesus, he asks them: *"What is it you want me to do for you?"*
- Likewise, he asks Bartimaeus: *"What do you want me to do for you?"*
- In contrast to the disciples, Bartimaeus wants to have his blindness removed so that he can follow Jesus in the Way.
- Such is his faith in Jesus, that Jesus does not even need to enact God's healing himself, but only needs to acknowledge that God's healing has already been put into effect.
- Where the disciples have failed to see, the blind man can see more clearly.
- And ends up following Jesus to Jerusalem - to the heart of God's kingdom.

The story of all disciples

- The story of Bartimaeus encountering Jesus is the story of all people called to become disciples.
- Bartimaeus recognises Jesus as being the key to a meaningful life - to a life that is both fulfilling, and filled with God's blessing.
- He has heard enough about Jesus to be able to see, even in his physical blindness, that Jesus has been anointed by God to be King David's heir in ruling over God's kingdom - a reign not established by force, but established by love.
- So Bartimaeus calls out, *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*
- He realises that he is not capable of entering the Kingdom of God in his own strength, and so calls out for help from the one who establishes that Kingdom.
- Anyone who wants to become a Christian - a follower or disciple of Jesus - cannot achieve this in their own strength.
- We all need to rely on Jesus to make this possible - calling out to the one who opens the Way for us to enter.

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- Just as Bartimaeus was faced with opposition, when *many sternly ordered him to be quiet*, so we and others might face opposition in being able to follow Jesus truly.
- Nevertheless, we need to push against the crowd, against those who would prevent us, or hold us back.
- Also, as those who are already followers, we need to encourage others who are not yet in the Way of Jesus, and who are seeking.
- Like others in the crowd, we need to be ready to join them and say, *“Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”*

Teachability

- The final interaction between Bartimaeus and Jesus gives us another really important insight into our own discipleship.
- All too often I encounter Christians, even parishioners in our own and in other parishes, who show themselves, in word or in action, to be unteachable.
- Strangely, they do not learn from Jesus, from Scripture, from Christian books, from spiritual leaders, or even from their sisters and brothers in Christ.
- They do not learn because they are not teachable - they are not willing to learn, they are not willing to be taught.
- Whenever I encounter someone who is not trying to grow in their faith relationship with God, I find it quite bizarre.
- For me, an unteachable Christian is an oxymoron - something that is in contradiction with itself.
- Bartimaeus highlights the vital importance for Christians to firstly be disciples - learners of Jesus.
- When he comes face to face with Jesus, for the very first time, he calls Jesus *“My teacher.”*
- In addition to the first disciples, a number of others in Mark’s Gospel refer to Jesus as a rabbi or teacher, acknowledging his public role.
- However, Bartimaeus goes beyond this by referring to Jesus not as *Rabbi*, but as *Rabbouni*.
- This goes beyond acknowledging Jesus as a rabbi or teacher, and refers to the teacher-disciple relationship in personal or intimate terms.
- There is only one other mention of someone calling Jesus *Rabbouni*, and that is by Mary Magdalene, in John’s Gospel, when she encounters the resurrected Christ.
- For Bartimaeus, Jesus is not only a teacher, but is more significantly *his* teacher - a teacher with whom he has a personal relationship.
- And this is what we, as fellow disciples, are invited to address Jesus as ourselves: not just as teacher, as a title, but specifically as ‘our teacher’, or, for each of us, as ‘my teacher’.
- Just as Jesus was Bartimaeus’ teacher then, we are assured that he is present even now, and able to have the same personal relationship with each of us.
- As today’s reading from the letter to the Hebrews states:
because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.
- We are given confidence that Jesus enables us to approach God, and speaks both for us and to us, even now.

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The Way

- Finally, the Gospel passage ends by stating:

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

- Bartimaeus,
 - having asked Jesus for help,
 - having been called by Jesus,
 - having forsaken those things that might have held him back,
 - having overcome those who would have prevented him,
 - having been encouraged by those who were with Jesus,
 - having been invited to publicly state his need and his faith relationship, and
 - having been given the insight that he has sought -
- Bartimaeus enters the kingdom of God in Jericho, and joins Jesus on the way - the way to the symbolic centre of the kingdom, the physical way that leads to Jesus' suffering, death, *and* resurrection in Jerusalem, and the way of sacrificial love.
- Just as Bartimaeus joined Jesus on the way, so we are called to join Jesus, or encouraged to continue with Jesus, in the way of sacrificial love.
- May you be inspired and encouraged by blind Bartimaeus, and have your eyes opened, so that you may see clearly to follow your teacher, Jesus.

In his name. Amen.