

Last after Trinity Proper 25/30 OT Year B 2018

When I was a teenager (dim and distant ages ago!) I remember seeing something which I have never forgotten. I was in the Cathedral in Truro one day when I saw a young blind woman being taken around the building. Her family led her to the pulpit and she ran her hands over it. The pulpit is made of Hopton Wood stone and elaborately carved with figures of Biblical characters. Even now I can remember the look of joy on her face as she explored the carving. What do you think the world was like for Bartimaeus? What was normality for him living in a world of darkness. Life was very different for him, as it remains for many blind people in the world today. He had nothing - a beggar, relying on the meagre offering of others just to survive – a life of wretchedness.

Coming as we do toward the end of our exploration of Mark's Gospel during the past Church Year, today's Gospel leaves us at the point where Jesus prepares to make his entry into Jerusalem. It closes a section of the Gospel which is designed to lead us on a journey about exploring what faith in Jesus means. If you thought that Mark was just gluing a few stories about Jesus together, trying to make some chronological order to real-time events, think again. Everything is there for a reason, and the Gospel writer challenges us to consider our own response to Jesus. There is no coincidence that the whole section begins and ends with accounts about blindness, and it is as much to do with the spiritual blindness of the disciples in recognising the reality of the nature of the Messiahship Jesus offers despite the journey they are making with him.

Let me take you back to where this section of the Gospel begins: Chapter 8: 22 At Bethsaida of Galilee a blind man is brought to Jesus, whose friends begs the Lord to touch and heal him. You may remember that Jesus leads him out of the village, puts saliva on his eyes and lays hands on him – the eyes begin to clear – 'What can you see?' 'People – but they look like trees walking.' Again, Jesus lays hands on the man's eyes and – his sight is restored, but it has been a difficult two stage affair, done at the request of the man's friends.

We then travel with the apostles- Jesus seeking to open the minds of those who are blind in a spiritual sense. 'Who,' he asks, 'do people believe that I am?' This is the moment of Peter's confession: 'You are the Messiah,' he says confidently. Jesus responds by telling the disciples that the Son of Man must endure great suffering, die and then rise after three days. It's no wonder that Peter argues with Jesus. It doesn't fit his expectation of the Messiah at all. How would you have felt had you been there?

We can feel for the disciples, but all the events following Peter's confession which lead to today's reading, are in a sense, like the first part of the healing of the man at Bethsaida. The disciples only have a partial understanding of the actual Messiahship of Jesus, despite his constant reminder that he must give himself totally out of love for humanity.

Mark then takes us to the Mount of Transfiguration – a glimpse of heavenly glory – but a supplanting of the great Theophany – the presence of God- experienced by Moses on Mount Sinai but now seen in the face of Jesus – one of us. After the descent from the Mountain we experience the cry of a desperate father whose son suffers from convulsions

– ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief,’ Jesus then teaches about approaching faith like a child. We then have an unattractive question from James and John about power – and more talk of children. All of these situations and teachings lead to the account of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.

Bartimaeus, as I said, is living in a world of darkness. He has nothing – like so many who live in the world - a beggar, dependant on others for life itself. Yet in the hubbub of the passing Mark, the Gospel writer draws attention to **Jesus the Nazarene**, the only time in the Gospel he is described in this way. Then another first from Bartimaeus, ‘**Jesus, Son of David**, have mercy on me.’ The Messiah was traditionally link to the Davidian line, and Bartimaeus is again the only person to call him by this title in the Gospel – This blind beggar’s voice is the call of a prophet, but the scene becomes almost farcical: the man calling out, people telling him off, even more shouting until Jesus tells others to call the man to him. There is that urgent dash as Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and rushes towards the voice he can hear and then another first in the Gospel – **Rabbouni** – again, the only occasion in the New Testament where this title of ‘great teacher’ is used other than from the mouth of Mary Magdalene in John’s account of the Resurrection.

A question from Jesus – the same as Jesus asks of James and John, fighting for power in the new Kingdom Jesus is bringing about - ‘What do you want me to do.’ However, the unattractive answer of James and John is replaced by simply the desire to see, and Bartimaeus is healed. There is no laying on of hands, no saliva, no difficulty. The healing is immediate. So, too is the reaction of Bartimaeus. He followed him on the way – he follows the one who is the WAY, because Bartimaeus has desired and wholeheartedly accepted the Lord.

Jerusalem lays before Jesus, and it would seem to me that it is not impossible that this expression of faith on the part of Bartimaeus means it likely that he experienced the whole of the Lord’s Passion, Death and Resurrection, from Upper Room to Easter Joy. I hope that you do not mind my having led you on this journey through the section of the Gospel, but today’s account is such a gift for us is, because it essentially deals with the very question of FAITH itself. It illustrates the way in which even those closest to the Lord put their own barriers up - they qualify who they believe Jesus to be. Despite Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, something he is comfortable with, we know how it all unravels for him. The journey of the disciples is a rocky one until they experience the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, when for them, everything changes. That is why we are here today.

Each one of us will have a different way of viewing and living faith in and through Jesus Christ. Some of us will have no doubts at all. Some will be clinging to faith by their fingertips. And that is perfectly alright, because the insistent Love of Jesus Christ never gives up, even when faith seems to have fled.

You have probably heard me say that I love a poem by the late Victorian poet, Francis Thompson. Thompson was a reluctant doctor who preferred poetry. Opioid addiction left him in the gutters of London where he was saved from certain death firstly by a prostitute who took pity on him, and then by a couple who supported him for the rest of his life,

publishing his poetry. He spent some time in Storrington at the Priory of of Our Lady of England. His poem, 'No strange land,' is subtitled 'The Kingdom of God is within you.'

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry—clinging to Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!

We each have our own clay-shuttered doors, but the drift of pinions is insistent – that wonderful imagery of wings running through the Bible, from the overshadowing of God's wings, to those of the heavenly host of angels. Bartimaeus flung open the clay shuttered doors of his heart and allowed the reality of Jesus to flood his heart with love, and his story is not just a history lesson from 2,000 years ago in Palestine. It is one for the here-and-now reality of our Christian Faith – Faith, lived out in our lives and through our actions, revealing that Christ does indeed walk on the Thames or walks the streets of Cuckfield in the way that **we** reveal his insistent Love. Thank God for Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus and his example of following Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.



Maria Laughlin – scratchboard artist

Jeremiah 31:7-9

⁷ For thus says the Lord:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
'Save, O Lord, your people,
the remnant of Israel.'

⁸ See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labour, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

⁹ With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations^[a] I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hebrews &: 23-end

²³ Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; ²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever.

²⁵ Consequently he is able for all time to save^[e] those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶ For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other^[f] high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.

Mark 10: 46-end

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' ⁴⁹ 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.' ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher,^[g] let me see again.' ⁵² Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.