

Sermon 27 October 2024

I had seen that blind man on the road a number of times before. He had not always been blind. I have heard that he went blind at five years of age. He was a beggar among many beggars on that road. I didn't make eye contact; I didn't even acknowledge him on that road. I treated him like another rock on the road, just a slightly bigger one with more rough edges about him.

Now I have to make a confession, I was in the crowd that day. There was Jesus, the disciples and a large crowd. We had all spent time in Jericho and now we were getting ready to leave. That same beggar was sitting at the side of the road. I found out later that his name was Bartimaeus, or Bart as many knew him. His name means son of Timaeus. Bart heard that Jesus was among us. To our real horror, Bart began to shout to get Jesus's attention. We were startled and somewhat embarrassed when he shouted. "He shouted Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" I was one of those who criticised him and tried to get him to be quiet, to shut him up. Bart simply made even more noise to get Jesus' attention. 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' What an embarrassment!

To our real surprise, Jesus stopped. What would happen next, we wondered. What approach would Jesus take with this fellow who was a beggar on the road.

Jesus simply said, "Call him." We did as Jesus said.

We called him. "Cheer up, get on your feet. Jesus is calling you."

Bart threw his cloak aside, jumped quickly to his feet and came to Jesus.

Jesus asked of him: "What do you want me to do for you?"

There was absolutely no hesitation, he had been waiting for this all of his life. The blind man replied, "Rabbi I want to see." And wow! What a response from Jesus that we could never have foreseen!

"Go," said Jesus., "your faith has healed you."

Bart received his sight and followed Jesus on the road.

I was part of that scene that day and I have reflected on it and shared the story many times over the years.

There is a similar story in Mark chapter 8, verses 22-26. This blind man was at Bethsaida. He too was brought to Jesus and begged that Jesus touch him. Jesus took him by the hand and led him outside the village. When he spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked: "do you see anything?" The man said, "I see people, they look like trees walking around." Jesus again put his hands on the man's eyes. His eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he now saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village." In this story unlike the one with Bart, this man was passive, he did not take the initiative. He did not take an active part. Bart, on the other hand, it play an active part, he threw off his cloak, got up and went to Jesus when he was called by him.

It is significant that Bart threw off his cloak. This may have been his only possession. As a beggar the cloak had an important role. He pulled it around him to keep the cold out at night. It kept him warm and protected. Perhaps he even hid under it when people made fun of him. The cloak was probably the most cherished and important item that he owned. And he would not have owned much at all. I wonder what the history of the cloak was. What was it made of? Where had it come from? How did Bart come by it? Who else had cherished it as much as Bart? Nonetheless Bart did not hesitate to throw it off in order to go to Jesus.

Bart had the attitude that he was not sick, he was blind. He was not one to sit around. He became a beggar because, due his blindness, no one would employ him. His blindness led to Bart being viewed as a liability. He had been begging for about 15 years... with friends who were also blind. He really did want to see but rather than dwelling on what he did not have he made the best of what he did have.

Jericho was seen as a rich place, which was where the money was, and the people were generous. Some said that people gave money due to their guilty conscience. It was to make up for all the dreadful things they had done and to show how good they really were. That was the reason for begging in Jericho.

Bart had always believed that Jesus would heal him...that someday it would happen. It is his unrelenting conviction that Jesus can and will rescue him from his need. Bart had heard that Jesus had healed those who were blind. He thought if I can just get close enough to him and look him in the eye and if he looks me in the eye, I will be

able to see. Then I can go where I like and do whatever I like. I can find my own way in life.

When it did finally happen on that day, he was ecstatic. He wanted to run home and tell everyone. For the first time in his life, he was free. He stood blinking in the light and looking at the scene around him. Then he looked long and hard at Jesus, who was leaving Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. And he decided to follow Jesus on that way, rather on his own independent way.

Bartimaeus has been compared with the apostles. Commentators have explained how Bartimaeus exemplifies discipleship, unlike the apostles, who utterly fail. At the end of the story, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. "Following Jesus" and "on the way" are recurring expressions in Mark that tell us about the theme of discipleship. The apostles are called to "follow" Jesus. While they follow him in the literal sense, they fail to understand or trust him. Jesus seems frustrated when he says to them in chapter 4, "Have you still no faith?" (4:40)

If we consider Mark chapter 9, when Jesus gives the second passion prediction (9:31), and the disciples "did not understand what he was saying" and were afraid to ask him about it (9:32). They then argue "on the way" (9:33, 34) about who is the greatest among them. While "on the way" (10:32) to Jerusalem, Jesus gives the third and last passion prediction. James and John come to Jesus, and he asks, "What is it you want me to do for you?" (10:36). They ask for the right and left seats next to Jesus (10:37). Their request shows how miserably they fail to understand his identity, mission, and teaching.

Jesus asks the same question of Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:52). Jesus grants Bartimaeus's request and recognizes his faith. Eventually, Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way" (10:52) to Jerusalem, where Jesus is crucified.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." For Bartimaeus, the title obviously indicates that Jesus is God's designated agent, and it introduces the notion of Jesus as a royal figure, an image that becomes very important when Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1-10), goes on trial (15:1-15), and dies (15:16-32) as a king. Bartimaeus, despite his blindness and all its connotations of spiritual ignorance (compare 4:12; 8:18), sees the royal dimensions of Jesus' identity. As the story progresses, we discover that Bartimaeus also discerns that Jesus is especially able to show mercy and heal.

Bart is persistent despite the hindrances he encounters along the way. Faith does not often come easily to people in Mark; it must surmount obstacles to obtain what it seeks (see 2:4; 5:27, 35-36; 7:27; 9:18b). Others in the crowd tell Bart off, demanding his silence. This detail reminds us that blind beggar's dwell right near the bottom rung of social privilege in ancient and contemporary society. Do people shout Bart down because they think he deserves to be who he is? Probably. Do they put their own needs before his? May be. In their ignorance about Jesus, the focus of his message, and his concern for blind beggars, their scolding of Bartimaeus threatens to reduce the range within which Jesus might dispense his compassion and grace. Bartimaeus knows better, and so he yells "even more loudly" until his words reach Jesus' ears.

Presumably Jesus could have walked to Bartimaeus to talk with him. Instead, he tells the onlookers to summon Bartimaeus to him. Now those who sought to inhibit the beggar must assist in Jesus' ministry to him. Then Mark adds one more delicious detail: Bartimaeus tosses aside his cloak. Obviously, he expects to regain his sight, for a blind beggar would ordinarily do well to keep his possessions nearby. He obviously expects a change in his status. His health problem (blindness) and his economic problem (begging) are a single piece of fabric that make up that cloak. As with other healings (5:1-20, 25-34), Jesus can restore Bartimaeus to a place of wholeness that will demand his belonging within society. When Bartimaeus casts off his cloak, he confidently anticipates that he will no longer sit on his garment dependent upon handouts from those who should pass by.

When Jesus asks Bart, "What do you want me to do for you?" his reply is a simple request voiced with the confidence that Jesus can deliver. "That I would see again," declares resolutely that Jesus can bring the wholeness and deliverance that people seek. In this confidence and simplicity, what Bart says is fully consistent with the expressions of faith others have made in Mark. Also, when we consider that Jesus' question repeats what he asked James and John in Mark chapter 10, verse 36, we note that Bart seeks no special privileges. This reiterates that Jesus has not come to bestow power and honour but to open eyes to the new spiritual, social, and material realities made possible when God reigns. When it comes to understanding what Jesus has come to do, the disciples James and John are more "blind" than Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus begins the story on the side of the road. He ends the story as a follower as in Mark chapter 8, verse 34: “then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Bart follows Jesus on the road. The shift here reflects Bartimaeus’ move from the invisible periphery of society to the heart of the scene. The movement also suggests more when we consider that “road” (or “way”) is a term Mark uses to indicate Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his suffering, the same “way” that he calls his followers to walk (see 8:27; 10:32; 11:8; compare 1:2-3).

In Mark, Bartimaeus is not the first person seeking a miracle who approaches Jesus in faith, but he is the only one who winds up following him, presumably straight into Jerusalem and into his confrontation with the temple-based aristocrats. After ten chapters full of so much secrecy, confusion, and misapprehension, Bartimaeus shows Mark’s readers that faith in Jesus remains possible and potent. Without Bartimaeus, and others in Mark like him who tenaciously cling to Jesus out of faith born from their urgent needs, this Gospel would offer little assurance that *anyone* could have the spiritual insight to perceive the mysterious ways of God in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. From seemingly small beginnings, tenaciousness amid hurdles and obstacles leads to constancy in faith paying off in Christ’s compassion and grace. Jesus asks each of us: “what do you want me to do for you”?

