

Isolation Radio Talk

Bartimaeus, not just another story from long ago

Good Morning

I have a problem; I dare to think you have a problem too; the diagnosis of the Bible is one of apathy and insensitivity - we are blind, we are deaf, we are lame; we see things out of focus; we do not see as God sees.

So let me introduce you to this pathetic person at the roadside; poor Bartimaeus. St Mark tells of the encounter (Mark 10.46). Bartimaeus might well be any one of us at any time; there are none so blind as those who do not want to see. Bartimaeus gets everything secondhand; someone tells him Jesus is there; he begins to shout.

Many people live on the edge of life today, relying on hearsay; it is no life at all. So many, like Bartimaeus, live on the edge of the road, covered with dust and dirt; their cry is the cry of Bartimaeus. You might think I have made this up; yet I wonder if you have ever used the cry of Bartimaeus? 'Certainly not!', you say. You have, of course; oh yes! We have sanctified it, made it beautiful, set it to music but the Church is never ashamed to use words of the common beggar of Palestine in the time of Jesus: Lord have Mercy, Christ have Mercy.

These were not holy words - they were not devised especially for Bartimaeus to shout at Jesus - they were not words for worship; it was the call of every beggar; 'Lord have mercy on me': it is a cry from the heart and a cry from the heart never, never, goes unheard by God. So far as we can tell these are the very earliest words used in worship. The phrase endures through the years because, at its best, the Church gets things right. Before God, you are beggarly. Like all good worship the Church takes the ordinary very human phrase and fills it with significance and even more importantly, with reality. But, and it is a big but, you need to see, because, given half a chance, you *will* get things wrong.

Bartimaeus had another problem, the age-old problem of the crowd. 'Be quiet, go away'; that is what I would say. Crowds get in the way; they always do; in a crowd you never see things right. Jesus had a way with crowds; he taught them with stories, Parables we call them. The point is that crowds tend also to get it wrong - they hear what they want to hear; see what they want to see. The parables give you little to take away unless you look behind them; they challenge comfortable ways of thinking.

So Bartimaeus! I suspect you are here this morning; you will need to be very persistent to break through the crowd. You need singleness of mind, determination and more than a passing enthusiasm. Crowds present yet another problem; put simply, Jesus gets crowded out; so much distracts you from a sight of him.

Did I say a sight of him? I have already forgotten; your name is Bartimaeus, you are blind! In the 21st post COVID-19 century, do not let the busy-ness of life crowd God out. Give time and space for God as you do for anyone else. 'Be still and know that I am God'; that is what the Psalm says (Psalm 46.10). It is the call of your Church to all who will hear. Stop; come and see. Take heart says the Church, he is calling you. Bartimaeus, take heart, your persistence has won through. The important first step towards God is to want to know him badly enough.

When Jesus says 'What do you want me to do for you' the most fundamental need of all women and men is asked for by that blind beggar - Lord that I may receive my sight.

It is not the first time that prayer is heard in Scripture: Elijah prayed, (2 Kings 6.17) 'please open his eyes that he may see'. Such is the need of the whole human race - a new vision, a new insight, a new outlook. It is not that you will see a different world, it is that you see the same world, God's world, differently. That is insight; that is the vision.

But be warned: seeing things from God's view, it is not the easy way, there is conflict, anger, action; how can anyone look at what we have done in God's world and remain complacent and unashamed? Small wonder that Jesus asks what Bartimaeus really wants.

Often you do not want to see: sometimes you pretend but are content to go on in the same blind way. When the paralysed man, at the pool of Bethesda, is asked by Jesus if he wants to be healed, he simply repeats what he has said for years and years: 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me' (John 5.7). He had said that for so long he did not want to get into the water. The power of sickness is that you can lose the will to be healed.

That might be you; it was not Bartimaeus. Sight comes to him at the command of Jesus; he turns and follows Jesus. How like Baptism that is - in those early days of the Church you came to the place of Baptism early on Easter Day, before sunrise; you stood facing west; as the sun rose you were asked; 'Do you turn to Christ?'; you replied, 'I turn to Christ'. As you spoke you turned to the East to see the sun rising for the new day. At baptism today, a candle is also given; 'Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father'.

Do you see then, the story of blind Bartimaeus is not just another story from long ago - it is about today, about you and me and our blindness. Now, this day, is the day to turn again to the light. It is this moment when you say again with utter conviction; God, now I really do see.

Bartimaeus recovered his sight and followed Jesus. God alone knows where you will end up if you follow him. I wonder what happened to Bartimaeus?

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray

Amazing grace
how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost,
but now I'm found.
Yes, was blind, but now I see.
Amen.