

Now I see!

Jeremiah 31:7-9, Mark 10:46-52

24 October 2021

A couple of weeks ago there was an interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme. It came from the Conservative Party Conference, where Nick Robinson interviewed Boris Johnson. After the first few questions the PM launched into a long speech whereupon the impatient reporter interrupted him, saying 'Stop talking Prime Minister!' Everybody took a deep breath. In the little hush that followed you could sense the surprised indignation, people in authority are not used to that kind of treatment.

On the other hand, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in our Gospel reading, would have been all too familiar with being silenced. He was constantly at the mercy of every passer-by there on the Jericho road. More often than not he would have been brushed aside, shouted at or simply ignored and left out of anything significant that may have occurred on the road in front of him.

This short story is so rich in symbolism it's not surprising that most interpreters concentrate on the metaphorical understanding of it. And clearly, Mark the Gospel writer had some of those in mind too, when he included this final interruption in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. He has already recorded a story where Jesus healed an un-named blind man in chapter 8, so these two healings, in a way, book-end all that happened in between. But, instead of going into all that perhaps today we may spare some thoughts to the person of Bartimaeus himself.

Here is someone with an obvious physical impairment living in a society, where people like him were defined by their impairments. The blind and the lame were outcasts and kept outside the limits of towns and they were excluded from all religious and civic duties and privileges. It is sad to say, that even in our enlightened western societies this has been the case until fairly recently. Not being kept outside the towns, of course, but certainly kept out of sight. Bartimaeus' life was lived on a very narrow scale. Would people have realized the extent of this limitation, do we realize the impact of any impairment on people's lives?

Bartimaeus had to develop special strategies to survive at all. As with all impairments, the other senses tend to take over the

job of the weaker one. If you can't see very well, your hearing becomes sharper, touch becomes more important (that is when it's allowed!). If you can't walk very far, you learn to make sense of things at a distance and information coming through other people becomes more important. If you can't hear very well, you watch people's actions and faces more keenly. This was brought home to me, when at some point I had a request from a member of a congregation to wear more lipstick to help those who may rely on lip-reading. I don't believe a male colleague would've had a similar request! Anyway, I am afraid I didn't follow that one up. One, sort of, hopes that microphones and printed sermon notes, video tapes etc may correct a preacher's shortcomings in this area. They remind us though, to be thankful that, most of our physical difficulties are greatly eased nowadays by technological developments. There are good hearing aids, special glasses, laser treatments, car adaptations, corrective surgery and so on. The kind, that wasn't available in the time of Bartimaeus

So, how did he manage? Well, he couldn't see, but he could hear and he did listen. He kept his ears to the ground. He had heard about Jesus of Nazareth, whose fame preceded him. And now that this same Jesus was approaching, Bartimaeus ceased his chance, perhaps his last chance, as Jesus had never passed this way ever again.

Much has been made of the fact that Bartimaeus had faith in Jesus because he recognised him as the long-awaited Saviour, a descendant of King David, who would save not just Israel but all humankind. Well, if we imagine ourselves in his place, sitting by the roadside day after day begging to keep ourselves alive, is it likely that we would have all this high theological awareness? Probably not. What we can say though is that whatever Bartimaeus' information was, it was encouraging him to put his trust in Jesus. The talk was that this amazing wandering preacher was compassionate, who cared for people, who had time for the most unlikely folks and that he could actually restore people to new life. As Christians, current day followers of this same Galilean rabbi, are we known for similar reasons? Do we have the reputation which would make us approachable to those in need? These are just some of the questions this story may raise for us.

So, Bartimaeus leaps into action. He throws off his coat, perhaps his only worldly possession, and runs to Jesus to hear the

same question Jesus posed to James and John a few verses before: 'What do you want me to do for you'? Well, we know how those two disciples answered this once-in-a-lifetime question; they wanted to secure their future in Jesus' coming kingdom by sharing in his status and glory. We have heard in last Sunday's sermon how this played out for them in the realities of trying to follow Jesus.

But Bartimaeus' need is more immediate. He had lost his sight and as a result he had lost his way in life. He could not even move from his begging spot without someone else's help. So, his answer reflects a more sober estimate of his plight, he is not worried about status or glory, rather he knows he does not want his narrow, limited life any more. He wants to be able to choose again what direction his life should take. And if this man, Jesus can help, than Bartimaeus is willing to leave everything else behind and take the risk. The result: Jesus grants his wish and he regains his sight and not only that, but he gains a different way of seeing as well.

There is a delightful old film still around called *The enchanted Cottage*. In it the main action is played out in a cottage reputed to have magical powers. This is where a badly wounded and facially disfigured soldier takes refuge against the prying gaze of the public. He is being nursed back to health by a not very attractive looking nurse. During the long way of recovery these two social outcasts develop a mutual trust and respect for each other. And as the soldier is likely to need the continuing help of the nurse, they decide to get married as a way of a practical solution. It is not until they truly fall in love that they suddenly realize to their surprise that their sight had changed. They now see a different reality in each other, which no one else can see. The scars disappear from the soldier's face and the nurse becomes a truly beautiful young woman. Within a film of course, it is quite easy to achieve this. The couple is convinced it must be the magic of the cottage that brought about the change. But a wise old friend, who is himself blind, explains that it is the love and faith and trust between them that has led them into this different world.

I think something like this happens to Bartimaeus in our Gospel story. The power of Jesus' love and compassion sees beyond his impairment and sees him as a whole person. Not just someone in need in one department, but someone needing a new direction. So Bartimaeus receives his sight. But not only that, he is given a different sight. We may call it insight -, a kind of perception which is

able to detect invisible connections. Now that his sight has been restored and the first thing he sees is the face of Jesus, his new sight tells him there is more to all this than a physical healing. He may not have known the precise details of Jeremiah's prophecy we've heard earlier. But he now understands that wherever there is welcome for 'the blind and the lame, for the woman with child and the woman in labour', and all those in any kind of need, that is already the realm of God; The God, who promised to comfort them and protect them; to guide them and accompany them. He experiences his healing as God's saving grace, to which the appropriate response is praise and shouts of joy and an allegiance to the One who conveyed it. Now he knows which way his life should go. He looked into the face of Jesus and he wants to be there where Jesus is, so he follows him.

Well, we don't know what happened to Bartimaeus after this encounter. But it is heart warming to imagine him as being there in the Palm Sunday crowd, fully restored singing and cheering, shouting for joy and giving Jesus all the honour and glory, he now knows, is due to him. His story teaches us that God is involved not only in our spiritual, but also in our physical well-being. Our pain and suffering, our frustrations along with our hopes and dreams are known and understood. Jesus has gone before us in all of it. We can also learn from Bartimaeus that praying for help may be a risky business, for prayer is not there to change God's mind, it is there to change us. The question is, are we ready to make those changes. But, the good news is that God is the most generous giver, who, like a good doctor, doesn't just treat one symptom, but has care for the whole person, who wants us to thrive and have an abundant life. May we have the grace to respond with equal generosity.

Erna Stevenson, Amersham Free Church