

Mark 10:46-end

Jeremiah 31:7-9

The image of someone begging on the streets is not an unfamiliar one in our own day. Even in a town like ours, there are always a significant number of folk who find themselves homeless, and often have a tragic story to tell as to how they got into this situation. And when you go along to Portsmouth or Brighton, the issue becomes even more pronounced. Many of the folk I've encountered in this situation are those who have spent much of their lives in care homes, or those with serious drug or alcohol addictions or mental health issues, those who have found it difficult to adapt to civilian life after having served for many years in the armed forces, and those who have simply fallen on hard times financially for one reason or another.

So perhaps our awareness of the plight of those sleeping rough on the streets of our towns and cities *today*, can help us in some way to sympathise with the plight of poor old Bartimaeus back in 1st century

Palestine. Jericho, his regular stomping ground, was the last stop on the pilgrimage route to Jerusalem, so it was a natural focus for Jerusalem's beggar population; there would be a good chance that pilgrims making their way to the holy city would be in a particularly *generous* mood when it came to giving to the poor. There were no state benefits for *him* – he was totally dependent upon the generosity of others. So Bartimaeus, on account of his extreme poverty and lack of sight, was well and truly consigned to the margins of society – someone to be pitied, but someone who at the same time was considered to have little intellectual or spiritual capacity. He lived his life in darkness – not only the darkness of eyes that cannot see - but the darkness of a life with no hope.

And yet, Mark chooses to place this account of Bartimaeus' encounter with the Lord Jesus at a very significant point in his Gospel – just before the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and all that was to follow during that first Holy Week. What Mark seems to be saying to us here is that this blind beggar,

outcast by society at large, actually has something to teach *us* about what it means to truly follow the Lord – what true discipleship *is* all about.

Because, first of all, when we consider Bartimaeus, we're reminded of the fact that real faith and true, *godly* wisdom, can so often be seen in the people we least expect it. We shouldn't be surprised at this, because as the apostle Paul says, ".....God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.....what is weak in the world to shame the strong.....what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are....." I'm sure we've all known folk who would not be held in particularly high esteem by the world, yet who nonetheless are people with a profound faith and a deep understanding of God's truth – who are an inspiration to *us* in our *own* Christian discipleship. Jesus recognised the faith of one 'on the margins' – so should we.

Or perhaps we may feel about *ourselves* – why would God be interested in *me*? Well, Bartimaeus

was hardly someone who would have been seen as having any significance in the eyes of the world. Yet in the eyes of the *Lord*, he was of infinite worth, such that 2000 years on, we're still talking about this blind beggar who sat at the roadside in Jericho. In our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, dating from the 6th century BC, the prophet looks forward to the time when the people of Israel will return from their exile in Babylon to the Promised Land. But ultimately the prophecy points forward to Christ, who will draw people from all nations and of all states and conditions into his Kingdom. Like Bartimaeus, *we* matter to Jesus, and when we turn to him in faith, we are welcomed into his Kingdom.

Then secondly, you may have noticed the way in which Mark records that those following Jesus tried to *hinder* Bartimaeus from coming to Jesus. When he cried out to the Lord, it says that "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet....." Now I do think there's a lesson here for those of us who call ourselves Christians. For no doubt, some of those trying to keep him quiet - who were preventing him from

coming to Jesus – were actually those who had been *following* the Lord, in other words, his disciples. These were the very people who should have been leading folk *to* Jesus, not trying to *stop* people from coming to him.

Sadly, of course, this has all too often been a recurring theme throughout the course of Christian history, as those who *claim* to be followers of Jesus Christ have actually hindered the work of God through their words, attitudes and actions. I'm sure you regularly here people coming out with that well-worn phrase, 'Well I don't have much time for religion – religion is the cause of so many problems in the world today.' (Of course, *some* folk use this merely as an excuse for not wanting to know about God and the Christian Faith). But nonetheless, one has to admit that in some ways this is understandable – the institutional Church, through its actions, has all too often *put people off*, rather than *drawn people to* the Christian Faith.

But leaving aside church history, what about us *today*? It's so crucial, more than ever, that *we're* aware of the example *we* set as we go about our daily lives as disciples of the Lord Jesus. During the course of our day-to-day business, do *our* words and actions serve to draw others *to* Christ, or do they push people further *away* from him? Are *we* truly 'walking the talk of faith'? Today, people more and more are wanting to know if Christianity can really make a difference to their lives and *we* are the ones they are naturally looking to in order to find out. Are we, through Christ, a truly *different* people, or are we coming across as no different to any non-believer?

And thirdly, the account of Bartimaeus' encounter with Jesus reminds us that true Christian discipleship involves a *wholehearted* commitment to following the Lord. It says that Bartimaeus "Immediately.....regained his sight and *followed* [Jesus] on the way." His encounter with Christ resulted not only in the restoration of his sight, but also a complete change of direction in his life. His

identity was transformed from being 'that blind guy who sat begging at the roadside in Jericho' to being a committed disciple of the Lord, travelling 'along the road' with Jesus.

In fact, though Bartimaeus might only have been a beggar, he gives up even the little he has to follow Jesus. Even before his sight was restored by the Lord, he had thrown "off his cloak", no doubt in eager expectancy. There was a certain recklessness in doing so, because his cloak would usually have been spread out on the ground to receive offerings from the passers-by. His willingness to cast it aside is an indication of his readiness to abandon all he had to follow Jesus – he was demonstrating *a real commitment of faith*.

What's more, have you noticed that Jesus actually asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want *me* to do for *you*"? It might have seemed rather obvious what he wanted. But the Lord nevertheless asks the question so that Bartimaeus himself could make the choice to put his trust in Jesus. Bartimaeus can't *earn* his cure,

but rather he's healed through a simple, though sincere, act of faith in Christ – it's his *faith* that has made him well. The thing is, salvation is *not* about what *we* can do for the Lord, but what *he* can do for *us* when we put our trust in him. We are saved, *not* through any good works we do for the Lord, but through faith in Christ alone and in what *he* has done for us through his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead.

So, as we consider Bartimaeus, there's a sense in which he wasn't the *only* blind person in the crowd that day when Jesus passed through Jericho. *Many* of the people on that road that day were blind. Yes, they might have been able to see with their eyes, but in a deeper, spiritual sense, they were dwelling in darkness. Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, was right there in their midst. But they were blind to his presence. The Author of Life was walking through their town, but only one person would actually ask to see *him*. People certainly made their requests to Jesus, asking him all sorts of theological and moral questions as he headed towards Jerusalem – the

religious leaders asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”; a wealthy young man asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”; and even the apostles James and John put in that request to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But it’s only Bartimaeus the blind beggar, who says to him, “My teacher, let me *see*.....” We live in a society which is hugely blind to faith. Folk are blind, but they don’t realise it. People are lost, without direction – wandering through life aimlessly. As an advert I once saw on the back of a bus simply put it, ‘Don’t follow me, I’m lost as well.’ No doubt we’ve all been there at some point in our lives.

As *we* are gathered here for worship this morning, Christ *is* in *our* midst – through his Spirit, he is with us now. So, as he passes by today, as he did 2000 years ago through Jericho, what will *we* do? Like Bartimaeus, as *we* journey on in the company of Jesus, may it be *our* desire to *see* him more clearly, to *love* him more dearly, and to *follow* him more nearly, day by day.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you save us, not through any efforts of our own, but by your amazing grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. Help us to show forth in our lives the fruits of your redemption, that through our life and witness, we may draw others to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.