

Real Sight

Job 42:1-7, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

I have always found that reading from Mark's gospel a particularly moving one, as well as a challenging one. There is always something powerful to me about the picture it gives us. A blind man, on the edge of Jericho, an outsider, ignored by the crowd, almost silenced by the crowd, calling out for help, defiantly. And he stops the Son of David on His road to Jerusalem.

The son of Timaeus – that's what Bartimaeus means – how I wish I knew more about him. What age was he? Did he only make his living through begging? Was he a native of Jericho? What happened to his family? Was he blind from birth or did he become blind over the years with one of those terrible illnesses, probably curable now, but incurable in his day? Did he accept his disability with good grace, or was he pushy and making people feel uncomfortable? Who paid any attention to him, ever?

There he is by the roadside outside the dusty town of Jericho. Even to this day Jericho isn't much to look at. They have a glass factory there, and it is surrounded by fig and banana plantations – about half-way between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It's all desert and rocks around it. What we call the Mount of Temptation looms above it. It is at the end of the narrow river valley that runs down from Jerusalem to the plain on which Jericho is situated – the route Jesus described in His parable about the Good Samaritan. Some think it is also the site of what David wrote about in Psalm 23 when he talks about the valley of the shadow of death.

Bartimeaus – on the outskirts of the city and on the outskirts of the town – still a child of God. Unafraid to call out. Drawn to the fact that when Jesus came by, he would speak out. Will the outsider be heard?

“The healing of Bartimaeus is especially significant for those who sit outside the church.”¹ When we look at this story we tend to jump to the interpretation of healing blindness – it’s set around the ‘blindness’ or ignorance of the followers of Jesus failing to ‘see’ what it was that Jesus came to do and be. The disciples, with Jesus most of the time, don’t quite understand what Jesus is about.

Bartimaeus, the outsider, by contrast is all too ready and eager for some vital contact with Jesus. What do you think the significance is that Jesus, with His face set towards Jerusalem and all that lay ahead of Him there, stopped to pay attention to Bartimaeus, welcomed the interruption, and spoke to the man that everyone else was trying to silence?

More than that, when they brought Bartimaeus to Jesus, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man, unabashed, with a persistence and a plainness and an honesty asks to receive his sight. And somehow, seeing comes, and Bartimaeus with his faith, followed Jesus on the way.

What do people on the edge of things, what do the outsiders ‘see’ that those of us on the inside no longer notice? What priorities do they have that we have lost in the complexity of our living and our traditions? This is a question that matters. It has mattered since the time of Jesus, and it matters today.

It matters because it will guide us through the next few years of our Church’s history. Who are we here for? What are we here for? How do we strike the balance between the things we must carry forward from the past, and the things that no longer have the same significance, and need to be put to rest? When we look at our website – which we are at the moment – does it make sense to the outsider, the person who is attracted to Jesus, but not yet part of the crowd? Would they find what they were looking for – healing, hope, acceptance, inclusion, welcome? Or would

they be 'shushed' by those who believe they know better? Not just the website – more often the first point of contact for people looking for faith, and looking for Jesus, but also, when they get here, the Church, its meetings, its groups, its worship, its people. Would those outsiders find what they were looking for – healing, hope, acceptance, inclusion, welcome?

Can I tell you – they do. Oh, there's room for improvement; there's a need for us to be consistent, but more often than not, you, the Church, have helped many people find healing, hope, acceptance, inclusion, welcome. You have helped them to meet Jesus. Thank you for doing that. Simple or complex, people like Bartimaeus come to churches like this, or look at websites or Facebook pages, and look for Jesus. They look for Him in the kindness and the willingness to help. They look for Him in music and sermons. They look for Him in activities that involve commitment, and others that they can skim through. There are people out there – the outsiders – waiting for Jesus.

Maybe we need to notice that amongst those who say they are agnostic or atheist, there are many others who believe in God but who don't belong to a specific religious organisation. They come to ask questions about the meaning of life and to change the world. Maybe what we see emerging is not a lack of religion but a different kind of religion. Is it perhaps a second reformation?ⁱⁱ Maybe these people who come looking for a baptism, or a wedding, or to pay their respects at a funeral; or to share in a public event like Remembrance, or be caught up in the mystery and confusion of Christmas and Easter services – maybe they see something that we have lost sight of in our devotion and in our duty. Maybe they see Jesus in us, around us, through us, or sometimes even despite us.

From their vantage point on the outside – that is where they have heard about Jesus – and been drawn to Him – and to find the places where He might be. Even here.

Of course we want Jesus at the heart of things; of course there is a need for some structure, and commitment, and things to be done decently and in order. If there is no centre, no heart, then there are no outskirts, no edges. But this Jesus of ours, on the edge of Jericho, met a blind man of faith who was longing to meet Him, and had something to ask Him, and was enabled to follow Him, joyfully.

From the outside, Bartimaeus had real sight. He saw what Jesus could do when asked; could be when followed. He wasn't shy at coming forward and calling out. He wasn't put off by the officious crowd (that would have included the disciples). The blind man on the outside of things had real sight, and helped those others see something about Jesus that they, with their eyes open, had missed.

Where are the male and female Bartimaeuses in Morningside, and Edinburgh, and beyond, waiting to meet Jesus, and daring sometimes to come in from the outside, and have their eyes opened by Him, and allow those of us who think we've seen it all before, to see something we've missed, something we haven't noticed, about the Jesus we have been following for years.

Perhaps each one of us will be asked the same question that Jesus asked Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" Might we have the courage to ask, "Master, let me receive my sight."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Lamar Williamson Jr, Mark, Interpretation Commentary, p198ff

ⁱⁱ Serene Jones, President, Union Theological Seminary, USA, New York Times, 22/10/15