

I had coffee with Trevor last Monday – and we met in Chatswood. It was bustling, except for the masks and QR codes, it was like pre-Covid times. There were even beggars back in their old places – I did briefly wonder where they'd been during the lockdown, and also how many people these days carried any loose change to give them – because we all seem to be paying by card now.

Now there are stories, and they pop up on our current affairs programs from time to time, about how much money such beggars make. I don't know if they're true, but I see people sitting or kneeling on the footpath, surrounded by their possessions, with a sign explaining their predicament and their eyes downcast. Just waiting for the generosity of strangers.

Perhaps they do make a bit of money, but I suspect most of them simply scrape by. Maybe what money they do make is squandered on alcohol or drugs – but in the end, what does that matter? What a thing to have to do... no work, no family support, no easy way to access government support. They are not simply humble, but they are humiliated.

The need for people to beg to survive is not new. Jesus said "For you always have the poor with you" (Mark 14:7) and certainly we read about people who are begging in many accounts in the gospels. Nowadays we have the Exodus Foundation, the Salvation Army, the St Vincent de Paul society and so on, we have aged and disability pensions and a raft of other government services, but back in Jesus' time, if you couldn't support yourself, and your family couldn't support you, then you were reduced to begging. Things were tough.

And that's how it was at Jericho, that today's gospel reading tells us about. Jericho is about 30km from Jerusalem, and it's the last stop that we hear about on the journey of Jesus and the disciples to Jerusalem which began in Caesarea Philippi back in Chapter 8.

At the start of today's reading, we learn that Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho. It's probably not the case that the crowd was following Jesus, but rather that Jesus and his followers were travelling as part of the crowd – Jewish pilgrims from Galilee, who were travelling to Jerusalem for the Passover.

And as they were leaving Jericho, a blind beggar was sitting by the side of the road out of town. Now you might think that the town centre, the marketplace or the synagogue would be a better place to beg, rather than the fringes of the city, and you'd be right. But remember, this was peak season in Jericho – it was bustling with pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, and with people cashing in them. I can imagine that the town leaders, much like modern Olympic organising committees, didn't want hordes of beggars worrying the pilgrims and interfering with the free flow of commerce.

So the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, and almost certainly many like him, would have been removed from the city, and they set up their begging operation – their cloaks spread out on the ground in front of them – hoping for a few coins from those leaving Jericho on their way to Jerusalem.

So blind Bartimaeus was sitting by the road, and he heard that Jesus is approaching, and he called out to him. At this point in the gospel, it's likely that every blind person in Israel had heard of Jesus' miraculous healing of the blind man in Bethsaida which Mark related in Chapter 8 (8:22-26). And blind people particularly, if they knew their scriptures would have linked that healing to the prophecy of Isaiah "He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." (Isaiah 35:4c-6)

When [Bartimaeus] heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Bartimeus identified Jesus as the Son of David, and in doing so, he identified him as the promised messiah, and acknowledged Jesus' power - he pled for mercy, he pled for healing.

We read that many rebuked him and told him to be quiet – that may have been the disciples, but it was more likely just the crowd of pilgrims. And I can sort of imagine it – just when you're out of the hustle and bustle of the city of Jericho, just when you're beginning the last leg of your journey to Jerusalem: Beggars. I used to leave work at North Sydney and walk to the station, and just as I was getting to the station, there was always someone wanting money from me. Sometimes it was a traditional beggar, who just needed money for a bus fare or a train ticket, or just needed another \$2 for a meal. Mostly, though it was people at the more professional end of the scale, equipped with a clipboard, bright T shirt and an even brighter smile. And if you've ever stopped to talk to them, possibly the world's longest handshake.

So I can imagine the pilgrims wanting the beggar to be quiet.

But he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Verse 49 tells us that Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here."

The journey from Jericho to Jerusalem had only just begun, but Jesus came to a stop when he heard Bartimaeus crying out. He made time for the beggar, and he treated the beggar with respect. In fact, he made the crowd treat Bartimaeus with respect as well. I can imagine the crowd parting, making way for Bartimaeus to come forward to meet Jesus.

And the crowd even encouraged him -And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." (10:49)

And at the summons from Jesus, Bartimaeus didn't hesitate - So throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. (10:50)

He springs up, and he throws aside his cloak – it's dramatic, and not only that, it's very definite. Bartimaeus is blind, and he's in a crowd. If he throws his cloak aside, he's not going to get it back. And for a beggar, a cloak isn't just a piece of clothing – it's what he spreads out in front of him to collect coins tossed to him. It really is his tool of trade.

But he tosses it aside to go to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." (10:51)

It is a simple request. But also one which would generally be considered impossible – ophthalmology wouldn't have been very advanced in first century Jericho... but there was the tantalising possibility that this man, Jesus, could do the impossible. Bartimaeus would have heard stories of Jesus – that he could cast out demons, and cure leprosy, and make the lame walk and the deaf hear... and he could make the blind man in Bethsaida see.

He could do miracles.

Which is outside our own experience: After all, we live in an enlightened age. An age of science and of evidence based knowledge. We know that men don't walk on water, blindness can't be cured by faith, water doesn't turn into wine, five thousand men plus women and children cannot be fed from five loaves and two fishes.

But the miracles confirm who Jesus is, and therefore confirm that Jesus' teaching is right. When Jesus says "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this", he's not speculating: he knows, because the miracles indicate that Jesus is from God – remember Nicodemus' words from John 3 - "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2).

The miracles are important to coming to an understanding of the gospels, and they are also important to understanding not only Jesus as the Son of God, but also for God's plan for the world.

We tend to think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order – that a disease is cured, or a storm calmed, or that thousands are fed, or that the dead are raised to life, or that that blind are made to see. But try thinking of them like this: Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order to the way God intended things to be, and as a foretaste of what things will be like when the world is ultimately restored to God.

In a perfect world – indeed in the perfect world which is to come – there won't be storms. There won't be disease. There won't be hunger. There won't be blindness. And, most of all, there won't be death.

In response to Bartimaeus' request to have his sight restored, Jesus said to him, "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (10:52)

Immediately, Bartimaeus could see. This is in contrast to what happened with the blind man in Bethsaida – where Jesus put saliva on the man's eyes, and then his sight was gradually restored (he could see people at first, but they looked like trees, and then there was a second touch from Jesus before his sight was fully restored). Or the raising of Jairus' daughter where Jesus said "Talitha Koum" (Little girl, get up), or healing the deaf man in the region of the Decapolis, where Jesus puts him fingers into the man's ears and spit and touched the man's tongue and said "Ephphatha!" (be opened)

Jesus' healing miracles sometimes use drama, sometime uses meaningful words or gestures, but he doesn't always. Sometimes it seems that gestures or words are used to emphasise aspects of the healings, but here, Jesus simply says "Your faith has healed you" – and Jesus' miracles don't even always involve the faith of the person healed. There is no 'rule' to how Jesus' miracles work. There is no element of "magic" or trickery, it is simply the power of God overcoming the effects of the world.

But this time Jesus says clearly "Your faith has healed you."

And then what happens? He follows Jesus. And this really sets Bartimaeus apart from most of the other miraculous healings – he follows Jesus.

If we go back to the beginning of the reading, in verse 46 we read that "a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging..."

Mark explains that this beggar's name means son of Timaeus, because Bartimaeus is an Aramaic name (the day-to-day language of the Jewish people) and the gospel was originally written in Greek (which would have a wider –and gentile – audience).

And I think it's significant that Bartimaeus is named in the gospel at all. If you go back earlier in chapter 10, for instance, you read the story of the rich young man, who comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. You probably know the story, but in a nutshell he's been a good person, obeying the law. Frankly, he was smug.

Jesus told him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (10:21).

When he heard this, the rich young man was shocked and went away grieving.

So, while the story of the rich young man is probably more well-known than the story of Bartimaeus, we don't know the rich young man's name. But we do know the name of the blind beggar.

After he's healed, we read that Bartimaeus followed Jesus along the road.

And this is in stark contrast to what happened with the rich young man. He was asked to give up all he had and follow Jesus, but he had so much he turned down Jesus' invitation and went away sad.

Bartimaeus, while he had a lot less, gave up all he had – his beggar's cloak – and followed Jesus.

And I think that might be why we know the blind beggar's name, but not the rich young man's - because Bartimaeus became a follower of Jesus and was likely known by many of the early readers of Mark's gospel.

In fact, Bartimaeus may well be the best example of a disciple we encounter in the gospels.

I wonder how we compare to Bartimaeus? We might not have a beggar's cloak to cast aside, but it's easy to become reliant on things of this world – or even obsessed or addicted to them. On money, on social standing (or social media!), on security, on family, on alcohol, on gambling.

And these may not be bad things, but they can push away what is most important. It's possible to be rich or powerful or popular or secure or to have a rich family life or drink or gamble and be a follower of Jesus, but if they get in the way of being a follower of Jesus, then that's a problem.

Jesus certainly had wealthy followers – and Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are the obvious examples – but in the case of the rich young man, his wealth was an obstacle to putting his trust in Jesus.

In the end, it is that trust, that faith that matters.

We don't know who else was around when Bartimaeus called out to Jesus – but it is likely that he wasn't alone, that he was among a group of beggars who would line the road out of Jericho begging for alms. Clinging on to making a living from the kindness of strangers, relying on cloaks laid out on the ground in front of them. We know of no others who called out to Jesus, and when Jesus answered cast their cloaks aside and followed him.

It's like that today. All people are in need in some way, but most people don't recognise the one who can save them – Jesus. People are sitting by a metaphorical road all over the world, wanting something or wanting something more, but even when Jesus calls them – as he did Bartimaeus – most choose not to respond.

Hopefully, all of us here have responded to Jesus call, just as Bartimaeus did. Our faith in Jesus might not have “made us well” in a physical sense, but we can be assured that our faith in Jesus has made us right with God. It doesn't matter what we might have done or relied on in the past, our faith in Jesus restores us to God, through the grace of Jesus.

It's not something we have earned, but something God has given. In response to Jesus' grace, Bartimaeus chose to follow Jesus on the way.

And so it is with us; in response to God's grace, we simply need too choose to follow Jesus on the way.

Amen.