

Seeing Jesus

There are stories, quite possibly urban legends, about how some beggars make a fortune, and perhaps a few of them 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, which is certainly what my parents told me when I was growing up. But what a thing to have to do... no work, no family support, no easy way to access government support. You have to ask strangers for money.

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 many people who are begging in the gospels. In Judea in the first century, and in most of the world for most of history, begging has been the only way for many people to survive – there were no charities and no pensions.

At the start of today's reading, we learn that Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho. Jericho was the last stop on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus and his followers were likely 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 named Bartimaeus was sitting by the side of the road out of town. Bartimaeus would have had his cloak spread out on the ground in front of him – hoping for a few coins from those leaving Jericho on their way to Jerusalem.

While he was sitting there, Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was approaching. 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 only a couple of chapters earlier (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)

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

Bartimaeus identified Jesus as the Son of David, and in doing so, he identified him as the promised messiah, and he also 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. I remember when 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. Much more often, it was people at the more professional end of the scale, the "charity muggers", equipped with a clipboard, bright T shirt and an even brighter smile.

I can imagine the pilgrims wanting the beggar to be quiet. They just wanted to get on with their pilgrimage.

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)

Bartimaeus didn’t hesitate – we hear that he threw his cloak aside, jumped to his feet and went to Jesus. (10:50)

Note that he threw his cloak aside: Bartimaeus was blind, and he was in a crowd. If he threw his cloak aside, he wasn’t going to get it back. And for a beggar, a cloak isn’t just a piece of clothing – it’s what he spread out in front of him to collect coins tossed to him.

But he tossed 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 was a simple request. But also one which was impossible on the face of it: 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.

This man, Jesus, could do miracles.

Which is outside our own experience: After all, we live in an enlightened age. An age of science and medicine. 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. And yet, as we read the gospel accounts, we find that Jesus did those things.

When Jesus says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like this”, we can know that 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).

As well as showing us who Jesus is, the miracles also show us for God’s plan for the world.

People usually 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 the blind are made to see, something like ‘magic’. But try thinking of them like this: Jesus meant them to be 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 simply 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 quite different 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 his fingers into the man's ears and spit and touched the man's tongue and said "Ephphatha!" (be opened)

As I've shared before, Jesus' healing miracles sometimes use drama, sometimes use meaningful words or gestures, but not 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 Judean people) and the gospel was originally written in Greek (which would come to have a wider – and less Jewish – 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 on the side of the road out of Jericho.

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

And this is in 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 everything 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 the writer and many of the early readers of Mark's gospel.

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.

We know that 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 that 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 well with God – 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 – that amazing grace we sang of earlier.

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 each of us; in response to God's grace to us, we simply need too choose to follow Jesus along the road.

Amen.