

**The healing of Blind Bartimaeus**  
**– Christ’s redemptive gift of healing**  
Mark 10:46-52 (Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6)

I mentioned last week how Mark especially uses *enacted parables* to show us what the Kingdom of God is like. The healing of Blind Bartimaeus is redolent with imagery that does just that.

I find today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel immensely moving and powerful. There is something about its simplicity and directness that speaks to the heart about the character of Jesus and his engagement with us in our humanness – it’s a very ‘Mark’ kind of story, a kind of story that presents as being about one thing but, the more you engage with it, turns out to be about a lot more.

Mark’s narration of Jesus’ encounter with Bartimaeus, doesn’t stand in isolation. As always, this story fits within a wider story of God’s dealing with his people to save and redeem. As such, it’s a story about God’s healing, transformative grace.

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Our reading from the prophet Jeremiah proclaims in triumphal tones, the coming of one to the remnant of Israel, who will gather in these outcasts, scattered in exile among the nations, and with joy deliver them from oppression; who will console and restore the broken and the vulnerable, so that they may find the abundant life promised for God’s people from old... Such is the messianic expectation that forms this story’s backdrop.

Yet, in Mark’s account, we also find a saviour who, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it in our epistle reading, “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness”.<sup>1</sup> Our God knows what it is to meet us in our need.

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<sup>1</sup> Heb.5:2.

Today’s gospel story from Mark is also part of a wider and strong tradition within the early church. We find it related by Matthew and Luke, though Matthew has “two blind men” approaching Jesus and Luke refers only to a “blind beggar”.<sup>2</sup>



There is, I think, a tendency for us to dismiss those who disturb us as nobodies. This way we can avoid the challenge they present us. On the net this man is callously identified as “Stinky Blind Bart”. But who is he? What is he thinking? What is it like to be him? Christ only knows...

Only Mark identifies the man in the gospel specifically by name – “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar”. Tradition has it that we are reading in Mark’s gospel, Peter’s recollections of his time with Jesus. Richard Bauckham<sup>3</sup> plausibly argues that not only is this the case<sup>4</sup> but the use of named individuals in the gospels points to it being “likely that many of these people were themselves the eyewitnesses who first told

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 9:27-31 (followed by a healing of a mute), and Luke 18:35-43.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. ch7.

and continued to tell the stories in which they [themselves] appear and to which their names are attached”.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, from both Mark’s personalised account and the simple yet direct emotion of its telling, one can’t help but wonder if this character wasn’t at the very least known to Mark’s community at a later date, whereas Matthew and Luke worked from sources. It’s as if Mark is relating an anecdote<sup>6</sup> that has been often told by Peter (if not Bartimaeus himself), and celebrated by the early followers of Jesus, its full significance being realised, as with so much else, only in the light of the events that were to follow in Jerusalem.

In any case, the similarities in the three tellings are of equal significance:

All three gospel writers situate the event not long after Jesus’ third prediction of his suffering and death, and just after teaching concerning humility and sacrifice and entering the blessings of the reign of God. All three also physically locate the encounter near Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, just before Jesus’ entry there and all the events immediately before his death and resurrection.

Mark’s is a rich and warm account of a particular instance of what is universally agreed was central to Jesus’ identity and mission: his ministry of healing, of making people whole.

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There is so much to take from this story. I just want to note four things and leave them with you to ponder; and even though clearly this story is primarily about Jesus as the one who ushers in the healing, restoring, saving, redeeming *shaloam* of God (that which Mark calls throughout his Gospel, the *Kingdom of God*), this week I want to focus more on Bartimaeus than on Jesus.

Firstly: Bartimaeus recognises who Jesus is – not just the much talked about Jesus of Nazareth but the Son of David, the Messiah, the one who

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.47. See also ch.3&4 where Bauckham argues for the significance of names appearing (and not appearing) in the Gospels.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. ch.9. Peter’s *chreiai* as Papias called them.

comes to save his broken remnant people, to lead them home from exile; a great company of people from everywhere, just like the crowd Bartimaeus heard heading off up the Jericho road for Passover in Jerusalem; a people which would include, as Jeremiah prophesied, “the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour”, those who would come with weeping, and with consolation would be lead back.

Ironically, Bartimaeus could *see* what those with sight could not. Jesus was his saviour.

Secondly: Bartimaeus determinedly and boisterously seizes the opportunity before him to demand Jesus’ attention and get what he needs.

Mark tells us earlier that “Jesus strode ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid” (10:32). Yet Bartimaeus pays no regard to their fears and emotions when it comes to getting what he wants. Their problems are for them. Somehow he had heard of Jesus’ remarkable power to heal, a power that identified Jesus as the Messiah so clearly that even a blind man could ‘see’ it; and he *wanted* it. It was not just insight that gave Bartimaeus courage, it was desperate need to be touched by God.

So Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus. He causes a scene. The more those around try to quieten him the more he calls. He doesn’t care for social convention or other’s admonitions.

Whereas we can forget “Stinky Blind Bart” as he lies there silent in his exhaustion, people who behave like Bartimaeus in our gospel are disturbing...

Until she died in 2006, every week I visited my mother in hospital. As I think I have shared with you before, normally I would get about twenty or so minutes with her before she started calling out: “Help me! Help me! Help me!” She wouldn’t stop, until you asked, “what help do you want me to do mum?” Invariably her answer was the same, “ I want you to take me home”.

So did Bartimaeus. When he “threw off his cloak, sprang up”<sup>7</sup> and dashed toward Jesus, he was beyond shame at being naked. He just wanted to go home. He wanted to be included – to go to Jerusalem for the feast like everyone else on the road. He wanted *out of* his wretched life and he wanted *into* the *fullness* of life only the saviour could deliver. He wanted redemption. He wanted to *see* again.

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This brings me to my third observation: Bartimaeus was certain that Jesus could help him, he decided that through Jesus he could enter into God’s ‘shaloam’ – God’s peace and wholeness; and having *decided*, he *committed to action*.

This sort of certainty, is what the scriptures call *faith*.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us, “faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen”.<sup>8</sup> This sort of conviction and assurance leads to *action*. The writer recites at length how Abraham’s journeying and the response of other Hebrew heroes of old exemplified this. His message is clear: If we trust, we act...

And so Jesus stops still. I imagine him turning as he calls the blind beggar over – the ever fickle crowd now encourage him to go.

Can you see Bartimaeus feverishly running forward, somehow homing in on the one who can change his life. Jeremiah’s prophecy says the lame and the blind will not stumble, for they shall come on “straight paths” to their father.<sup>9</sup> Similarly Mark makes no mention of Bartimaeus falling – he simply makes his way to Jesus directly.

Just going back to cloak... This detail is a nice touch, not only because it points to the authenticity of an eyewitness account, but in a stroke it points us to something important: the beggar wouldn’t have owned much. You would think his cloak was something precious to him – it kept him warm at night and the sun off by day – imagine the Blanket

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 10:50.

<sup>8</sup> Heb.11:1.

<sup>9</sup> Jer.31:9.

Man<sup>10</sup> without his blanket. Yet Bartimaeus doesn't seem to care. It's an encumbrance, something that gets in the way of what he really needs, so he *abandons* it without thought as he comes to Jesus.

And so, lastly, we get to it... When Jesus asks him, “what do you want for me to do for you?”, Bartimaeus is quite clear: “*Rabbouni*”, he replies, “let me see again”.<sup>11</sup>

Notice here two things: when just previously on the same road Jesus asked his self-professed disciples what *they* wanted, they asked for privilege; one at his right hand, one at his left in the new society as they imagined it.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, Bartimaeus' response is both as compelling as it is telling: he no longer addresses Jesus as Son of David, or Messiah; he isn't so interested in the bigger picture, he just wants to see again – he just wants his life back; he wants acceptance. So for Bartimaeus, Jesus becomes, *Rabbouni*, “*my* teacher”.<sup>13</sup> This has become a personal encounter between the believer and his deliverer.

Jesus responds with equal simplicity and insight: he tells him to “*go*”, since his faith had made him well.

The interesting thing is that having “immediately regained his sight”, instead of going, Bartimaeus follows Jesus “on the way”.

Mark begins his gospel by telling us, “this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, that, “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the good news”.<sup>14</sup> It seems here, near the end of his story, Mark is telling us what an appropriate response to his gospel is:

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<sup>10</sup> A well-known street person in Wellington who died in 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Mk.10:51.

<sup>12</sup> Mk.10:37.

<sup>13</sup> As the NRSV translates it.

<sup>14</sup> Mk.1:1, 15.

- As we listen to the Gospel we need to *recognise* who Jesus is;
- we need to *understand* our own need and *desperately* want the *redemptive healing* he offers;
- we need to *trust* that God will meet us in our vulnerability and, *abandoning* ourselves to Jesus, throw ourselves upon his mercy;
- when God meets us, an appropriate response is a life committed to following the Jesus way – the way of humility, joyful abandonment and new life.