

What Do You Want Me to Do For You?

Mark 10: 46-52 (NRSV)

46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. **47** When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" **48** Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" **49** Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." **50** So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. **51** Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." **52** Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Sermon:

The central section of Mark's gospel (8:27-10:52) contains three themes that are each repeated three times, namely Jesus predicts his passion, the disciples respond inappropriately, and Jesus teaches on the true nature of discipleship. In biblical literature, when something happens three times it signifies a message of key importance. Today's gospel reading ends that central section with a miracle story illustrating the genuine faith of a blind man whose sight was restored by Jesus and who then became a follower of the Way.

It's a well-known story that is repeated in Matthew and Luke. Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho making their way towards Jerusalem. Mark's account gives us the identity of the blind beggar as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Perhaps he became well-known in the early Christian community to whom Mark wrote. Bartimaeus proclaims the identity of Jesus, not just as someone from Nazareth but as the son of David. Mark is emphasising Jesus' messiahship by a royal connection to Israel's great king, just prior to the Triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, to the annoyance of the crowds, shouts "Have mercy on me" – asking the son of David, with a reputation for mighty miraculous signs, to extend grace towards him and heal him. The people tell Bartimaeus to "be quiet" – you are not important so don't bother Jesus.

We need a quick rewind of Mark's drama here. Earlier in the chapter we read of others who were also rebuked and told to not bother Jesus, this time by the disciples. They were the little children whom Jesus then welcomed and blessed. He turns the incident into a teachable moment as to the attitude of heart needed to be a part of God's kingdom. It is to be like the least of all, a child or a servant, not someone who – for whatever reason – feels some sense of entitlement. Mark then relates the story of the rich and pious man. His wealth, understood through the theological lenses of the day, was interpreted as a sign of God's blessing. Jesus sees the man's heart and challenges him to let go what

he values most, which he could not do and so he leaves a sad man. The disciples are stunned and Jesus uses this situation to again teach the true nature of discipleship.

Fast forward to today's incident. The gospel writer tells us that Jesus, hearing both the cries of Bartimaeus and the rebukes of the crowd, stopped in his tracks. He *had* time to interact with a blind beggar who referred to him as 'son of David'. Jesus asked a seemingly simple question: "What is it that you want me to do for you?" Blindingly obvious we might think! But the question is insightful. Consider this hypothetical scenario. A person comes to, say, a minister or a doctor and relays their story; the minister or doctor then suggests positive practical steps to address the person's genuine need. At which point, imagine the person changing the topic and starting on another saga of woe. The person is not so much interested in making progress towards being made whole, but having an audience. They may see themselves as a powerless "victim" and, subconsciously perhaps, *like* that label and have no real desire to change. It devolves them of proactivity and responsibility – yes, life is hard and unfair but playing the victim card can be like wearing a comfortable pair of old shoes. Obviously we don't know, but perhaps Bartimaeus needed to be confronted by Jesus with that arresting question: "What is it that you want me to do for you? Do you *really* want your life to be radically changed? Or do you want to continue in your life of begging?"

Regardless, I suggest there is *even more* going on here. Mark puts the same phrase in the mouth of Jesus just a few verses earlier. In Mark 10:35 we read:

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." **36** And he said to them, "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" **37** And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." **38** But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. "

Being part of Jesus' closest followers gave James and John a misguided sense of importance and entitlement. They sought status, influence, and glory - and thought that as "insiders" they warranted special merit. James and John misunderstand the mission of Jesus. They don't get the upside down notion of status in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus again explains that to be part of God's kingdom, a follower of the Jesus way, you need a heart of a servant.

Mark uses the story of Bartimaeus to contrast *his* heart with those of James and John. The story also points out what Jesus could and could not do. He could not promise status and power to James and John for it was not his to grant. But he could and did grant Bartimaeus' request to let him see again. Remember being blind and giving sight is certainly a physical healing in Mark's account, but it also signifies more. It not only points to Jesus, the son of David, as being the long-expected messiah, but it speaks of spiritual blindness and being able to see the signs of the times as they really are.

Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "Go; your faith has made you well." Faith begins with recognising who Jesus is and that he has the power to rescue. The gospel writers make it clear time and again that faith is

open to all, and often it is unexpected “outsiders” who seem to have it most strongly. Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and, instead of “going” away he follows Jesus *on the way*.

This phrase - “on the way” – also caught my attention. Bartimaeus had not “arrived” at his destination when he was healed; rather that was the beginning of his life-long journey. This is a dynamic, rather than static, understanding of life – where *becoming* is just as important as *being*. Indeed the earliest Christians, as the Gospel writer knew full well, were called ‘people of the way’. As Christians, let us not look back wistfully at high points in our lives where we felt connected with God in some special way, but recognise that we are on a *pilgrimage of becoming* and, like Bartimaeus, journey with Jesus *on the way*.

In summary, Bartimaeus could echo the words of the psalmist (Ps 34):

- 1 I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”
- 4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.
- 6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.
- 8 O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

What about you and me. If Jesus asked us today "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" what would we say? Do we really want our lives to be radically changed? Do we really want to be rescued from our various situations? Or do we come as needy, powerless people wanting to be made whole by Jesus, the Rescuer? Whatever we ask, it is not a demand, but a request. I believe Jesus knows our heart, and desires that we are made whole. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus says to us, here, today "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" And, as in our story, Jesus will stop and listen to our replies. Let us bring our requests in faith to him. May we encounter afresh today the risen Christ and be made whole. Whether we are rich, or poor and needy, let us not walk away from Jesus with sadness but respond in faith and gladly become followers of the way. May we also “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Amen.