

SEEING THINGS TRULY

Jeremiah 31. 7-9

Hebrews 7. 23-28

Mark 10. 46-52

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

At approximately 700 feet below sea level, Jericho is the lowest city in the world. It is here that our Lord meets two people who were counted as the lowest among the low – Bartimaeus, a blind beggar; and Zacchaeus, the tax inspector whose story is related elsewhere in St Luke's gospel.¹

Jericho, as you will remember, is a city that is rich with biblical significance. Jericho is the city of song and story. It is at Jericho that Joshua fought that famous battle during which the very walls of the city were brought to the ground. It is Jericho that once blocked Israel's entry into the Promised Land; and when God brought victory to Joshua at Jericho, that town became a gateway to the victory of God.

In St Mark's gospel we find Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, sitting at the outskirts of Jericho. The city is actually an oasis on the edge of a desert; but it is also located at the beginning of a mountain pass that leads up to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is 17 miles away, and the journey to Jerusalem must be made uphill. Jesus, the Son of David, is on his way to Jerusalem, the City of David; and neither will be the same again after this encounter. In just over a week's time in St Mark's gospel, our Lord will be crucified in Jerusalem. But at the moment, he is simply passing by Jericho.

Because Jericho is situated on Jesus' route to Jerusalem, it is once again about to become a gateway to the victory of God which will be achieved by our Lord's

¹ Cf. Lk 19.

passion. Bartimaeus surely does not understand this fully, but he himself is about to become a herald of the victory of God, simply because he has a right perception of who Jesus really is. He realises that our Lord, the Son of David, has come to fulfil divine promises.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he recognises that this moment is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not to be missed. The people had come out to see the miracle-worker, the rabbi, the wandering preacher. But Bartimaeus is more perceptive than all the others. Even with blinded eyes, he can ‘see’ what the others do not. Here among them is the Son of David, the Messiah. The crowds are blind to this fact, and they try to keep Bartimaeus quiet. But the blind man knows the urgency of his situation and cries out, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’

Hearing Bartimaeus, our Lord stands still and says, ‘Call him here’. When called, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak; not to be hindered, he springs up, wearing only his tunic of linen cloth and comes to Jesus. Our Lord asks, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ We all feel that the answer is obvious. But not Jesus – he meets each need personally, and does not offer a cure without hearing the need explained. When Bartimaeus says, ‘My teacher, let me see again’, his sight is restored.

Centuries before this divine encounter at Jericho, the prophet Isaiah wrote that one of the signs of the coming of the Messiah and the coming of the kingdom of God would be the opening of the eyes of the blind.² Isaiah wrote that those who were saved would be able to see properly.³ Sadly, however, as Isaiah also wrote, some people cannot see God; because they are blind to him.⁴ Having true vision depends on how we see the world and how we perceive our God.

² Cf. Is 29. 18; 35. 5.

³ Cf. Is 52. 10.

⁴ Cf. Is 43. 8; 56. 10; 59. 9-10.

Some of you may remember Mr Magoo, the comic and cartoon character. In the comics and cartoons, Mr Magoo was always funny because he was so short-sighted. He would walk across crocodiles, thinking that they were logs; he was capable of stepping out of a window in a high-rise block of flats, just as the window-cleaner's hoist reached the window; and he was known for stepping off the side of a pier just as a boat pulled level alongside. In spite of his short-sightedness, Mr Magoo didn't ever come to harm; but he often left a trail of chaos and disaster behind him.

In our gospel account today, Bartimaeus is not short-sighted; he is blind. Yet in spite of his blindness, he has a very clear vision of his limitations and of his need for God. His awareness of his limitations leads him to cry out, 'Son of God, have mercy on me!' Bartimaeus is ready to embrace his limitations and to acknowledge his need for the touch of God. Bartimaeus knows that he cannot help himself; but he knows that our Lord can help him.

As Jesus heals Bartimaeus he says to him, 'Go, your faith has made you well.' After his healing, Bartimaeus does indeed go; but he does not go on his way. We are told that he followed our Lord on *his* way, back to Jerusalem and the events of the Passion that awaited him. When Bartimaeus first started to follow Jesus, it must have been easy. But as the events of the passion unfolded, we can imagine that Bartimaeus might well have said to himself, 'Lord, did you give me sight to see this?'

If we look a little further in the gospel of St Mark, we find a curious verse in chapter 14. Our Lord has just been betrayed and arrested; and verse 50 tells us that 'all of (the disciples) deserted him and fled.' And immediately after that verse we read, 'a certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They (that is, the chief priests, scribes and the elders) caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.' Many biblical commentators think that the young man referred to here is St Mark himself; but others suggest that the young man without a

cloak is Bartimaeus. He has seen the betrayal of Jesus, has seen the other disciples flee; and yet he attempts to follow our Lord to the end.

The story of Bartimaeus ought to be a source of great encouragement to us. It shows how a blind, young, destitute beggar sitting on the side of the road in Jericho became the herald of the victory of God, accomplished through the Son of David. Bartimaeus had no particular right to become a herald of God's victory; and he had no special ability to do so. But in his mercy, our Lord chose to show his glory through the handicap of Bartimaeus. He was not limited by Bartimaeus' limitations; nor is he limited by ours.

I wonder, what are your limitations? I certainly know mine! For some of us, it's our abilities that are limited; and for others of us, our limitations are caused by certain people or circumstances in our lives. Many of us, when faced by these limitations, say 'Well, if I have these limitations, God can't use me. He needs to move on and find someone else.'

In our story this morning, when Jesus asked for Bartimaeus to be brought to him, the people called the blind man, saying, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' Our Lord calls all of us; and as he does so, may we take heart; and embrace the truth that our limitations are not liabilities. Our limitations can be used to magnify the greatness of the mercy of God and of his promises. Our limitations can be gateways to the victory of God as we choose to still follow him.

Amen.