

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity

27th October 2024

All Saints' Marseille

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Before she was ordained, the Bishop of London, Dame Sarah Mullally, was the Chief Nursing Officer for England. I recall her preaching a sermon about the questions Jesus sometimes asks when people come to him for healing. In the Fourth Gospel, there's a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years, to whom Jesus asks: 'Do you want to be made well?' The answer may seem obvious, but Bishop Sarah said it reminded her of working on the accident and emergency wards of a London hospital, when people suffering from addiction would come in late at night seeking medical help. She often wondered what it was that had triggered that moment, the moment when they suddenly said: 'This needs to change.' It was, said Bishop Sarah, one of the most moving things about being a nurse, witnessing that moment in someone's life, watching a doctor set them on the road to recovery, with love and encouragement. 'Do you want to be made well?'

In our Gospel reading today, the question Jesus asks Bartimaeus is: 'What do you want me to do for you?' Again, the answer may sound obvious, but Jesus invites Bartimaeus to name his vulnerability – 'let me see again'. There are other

dimensions to the question too. For in this miracle story, like the others, there are many layers.

What do we know of Bartimaeus? We know that he wasn't born blind, as he asks Jesus to help him see 'again'. But his acquired condition has left him destitute, outcast, begging by the roadside. He has hit rock bottom (the place from which a person battling addiction often begins their journey towards recovery).

The man who had been ill for thirty-eight years replies to Jesus's question 'Do you want to be made well?' by saying that he can't access healing because he can't get quickly enough into the pool of Bethesda - the pool that was thought to have healing properties for the first person to get in after the water was stirred up. That story touches on a tendency in all of us, when facing a choice that might help us change, to say 'well of course I would, but...'. Not feeling able to let go of the props we feel we must hold onto.

Some commentators have seen Bartimaeus's cloak as such a prop. The cloak was his only protection, possibly his only possession. It would have been wrapped around him against the cold of a Jericho winter. It would have been spread out on the ground to receive alms, his only livelihood. He might have held onto it tightly. Yet when he hears that Jesus is calling him he springs up, 'throwing off his cloak'. How different from the rich young man earlier in this chapter of Mark's Gospel, who couldn't let go of his possessions. Bartimaeus comes to Jesus with empty hands, ready to receive.

‘What do you want me to do for you?’ If we think back to last week’s Gospel, we have heard those words of Jesus before, when James and John came asking for prime places in the Kingdom – status, glory, fame. Bartimaeus answers with just four words: ‘let me see again’. He longs for renewed vision, and all that would come with it – wholeness, acceptance, inclusion, a future.

Mark’s story highlights Bartimaeus’s insistence, his own agency in his healing. The divine will somehow needs our human will to cooperate. There is call and response, almost in circular motion. Jesus is there to heal. He also responds to the call of human pain. Bartimaeus has been calling Jesus. Jesus now calls Bartimaeus, and Bartimaeus responds in turn.

‘Go’, says Jesus, ‘your faith has made you well.’ But Bartimaeus doesn’t ‘go’ – instead, he follows Jesus ‘on the way’. In its earliest years, the ‘Way’ was the word used to refer to the Christian faith. The way of the cross, but also the way to life, resurrection and new creation. Being made whole. Being made well. That’s what salvation meant to the earliest hearers – in Greek, the word for wellness and salvation is the same.

The healing of Bartimaeus is the last miracle story in Mark’s Gospel, just before Jesus arrives at Jerusalem and the passion narrative begins. It’s the climax to a theme important to Mark, that of spiritual blindness and sight. Jesus’s teaching about the nature of his messiahship is complete, but the disciples are still only half seeing, as their quarrelling about supremacy in the last scene showed. By contrast, Bartimaeus immediately recognizes Jesus as the Messiah: ‘Son of David, have mercy on me’. Until now, Jesus has told anyone who thinks he is the Messiah not to speak of it. But he allows Bartimaeus to shout it.

The healing of Bartimaeus is a story of transformation. At the end of this service, we will sing the hymn 'Amazing Grace', written by the former slave trader John Newton. In it, Newton writes of the power of grace that turned his blindness into sight. Transformation through following Christ is liberating, a change from being self-centered to becoming centered on God and others. The giving way of blind eyes and a closed heart to compassion and hope.

One more layer. Bartimaeus is the only person healed in Mark's Gospel who is named. Some say there is significance in this. His name is 'son of Timaeus'. The surrounding culture in which these events are taking place is Greek. The Greek philosopher Plato had written a dialogue called Timaeus, which would have well known to some of Mark's hearers. In it, Plato wrote that sight was the source of the greatest benefit, because when we contemplated the heavens it led us to philosophy, which for him was the greatest good 'ever given to mortals'. So perhaps at one level Mark is saying: this good news is beyond Plato, this good news is better than philosophy - following in the Way.

The Gospels were written looking back at the crucifixion and asking: 'was this good news?' Mark's unequivocal answer is yes. He contrasts Jesus's liberating, radical message of love with the spiritual and moral blindness of the religious authorities with whom he was so often in dispute. The blind man begging beside the road 'gets' it. The authorities don't. The disciples do some of the time, but then they get weighed down by the props of status and position. But this man has none of that. That's why he is remembered. Blind Bartimaeus understands and trusts the upside-down kingdom of God.

When we come to the Eucharist, like Bartimaeus we come with empty hands, ready to receive. And what we receive is everything. Through Scripture, sacrament, in fellowship within the body of Christ, what we receive is God's own self to nourish us. Not because we deserve it, but because that is what God is like. A God who in Christ meets us where we are and says, 'What do you want me to do for you?' Overflowing with love, now and forever. And that *is* good news.

Amen.