

Martin White. 8th June 2008. Mark 10:46-52

Encountering Jesus: Bartimaeus.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are many wonderful miracles - Naaman is healed of leprosy; the widow of Zarephath's son is raised from the dead; God provides oil that doesn't run out during a famine. But one miracle that doesn't happen through the entire OT is a blind person receiving sight.

The OT does mention this though, looking forward to the Messiah in Isaiah 42 and elsewhere:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight...

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

(Isaiah 42:1,6-7 NIV)

This is in one of Isaiah's "Servant songs" which pointed towards the coming of the Messiah, and so everyone in Israel was looking and waiting for this to happen, as a sign that He had come.

And, as I was counting up this week, I think that this was the most common miracle that Jesus did... and one of the most controversial. The whole of John chapter 9 follows the account of Jesus healing a man who was born blind, and the huge reaction it receives from the Pharisees, who criticise Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and criticise the blind man for having been 'steeped in sin from birth' meaning that he had been under God's deserved judgement.

And sadly, in nit-picking about theology and closing their hearts to the truth about Jesus that was staring them in the face, they missed their Messiah.

I want to look today at another account of Jesus healing a blind man - Bartimaeus, and although this is a very short exchange of words and the whole thing may have been over in a moment, actually, lots happens. I want to pick out some things about Jesus and how Bartimaeus responds to Him that we can learn from this encounter.

But first, I want to try to set the scene.

Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem, where a week or so later He was to be crucified, and there are huge crowds of pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival that was about to happen.

So picture hot, dusty, crowded streets leading out through the gate of Jericho, which is about 15 miles (a day's journey) from Jerusalem.

This is a kind of holiday time and Jesus is heading determined towards Jerusalem, and as the crowds pass through the gates, a blind man, who people would be familiar with and many would know by name and know his family, starts calling out "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

I want to pick up the story in Mark 10:

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52 NIV)

We're looking at the moment at encounters that different people had with Jesus in the gospels. I'm finding this a wonderful subject to be thinking about again and am being overwhelmed as I prepare my preaches by Jesus' deep, personal grace and love for us.

Although this is a short meeting, I think that there is a lot happening between Jesus and Bartimaeus, and I think there is a lot to get hold of for the time that we're in at the moment.

1. He is persistent.

The first thing to notice about Bartimaeus is that he is very determined; when asked to be quiet, he shouted all the more.

There were lots of reasons why it wasn't likely that Bartimaeus should meet Jesus:

- There was a big crowd of people, all pressing past, so just the practical issue of getting to Jesus would be difficult.
- And Bartimaeus literally can't see what is going to happen - it is a leap of faith with some risk involved; and all he has to go on is what he has heard- probably a very partial picture, but he knows something - Jesus healed the blind man in Bethsaida in Chapter 8 & the blind man at the Feast in John 9
- And, to make it even harder, his attempt is strongly slapped down by lots of people - *Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet*. This probably came from lots of people who were offended by him using the term "Son of David" which was a title of the Messiah, but possibly the disciples were also stopping him from distracting Jesus (which they did at other times - "Don't bother the Master") And the word means that they were judging him and giving a sharp, stinging rebuke.

Whoever was telling him to shut up, the result was that he shouted even louder - keeping on going in the face of criticism, obstacles and people's opinions.

I know that many of us have met opposition when we have tried to follow Jesus - ranging from people who have lost friendships and been laughed at or criticised by their families, to people in the Crown who have literally decided to follow Jesus at the risk of their lives.

When we make any stand for Jesus; any decision to follow Him - big or small, I believe, just as with Bartimaeus, He sees faith that thrills Him and catches His heart; I believe He can't pass by!

2. He takes decisive action

Verse 50 says that he threw his cloak aside. This cloak would have been closely linked with his identity - it's how people would have recognised him and is what he would have spread out in front of him while he was begging. For a blind man, this was also decisive action, because, in the crowd, if he was not healed, he may not have been able to find it again.

I think there's a lot in this.

Angela Kemms talks about this in terms of healing, and the danger of people identifying themselves with their illness - "my cancer", "my arthritis". I think that if this is the case, then it is something that can get in the way of us being healed and trusting God.

But Bartimaeus fully takes his chance; in effect he is ready to let go of his identity, his reputation, his security and probably anything else, in order to encounter Jesus.

I believe that this is a time when Jesus is close to His Church, when His Presence can be felt, and the Bible's advice is:

"Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6 NIV)

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts." (Hebrews 4:7 NIV)

I love this church and think there is maturity here, we know the Bible, we love God, we're friendly, we're welcoming, but I don't think we are great sometimes at responding to God.

We miss this "at all costs" attitude that Bartimaeus shows.

An example is the way we respond to words of knowledge.

Sometimes accurate words are brought, then no-one responds, and then, during the break someone comes up for prayer, or we hear two weeks later that someone knew the word was for them.

I don't think there's anything more 'spiritual' about standing up or coming to the front (actually God seems to be spontaneously healing people during worship times at the moment) but I do think that there's something Jesus loved about Bartimaeus' response; burning his bridges, passing the point of no return, and I think that Jesus' eyes are on us when we take that step.

As I have said before, the moment after someone has brought a word and someone has responded, there is lots of faith too.

And in responding (or at least in sharing testimonies) it means that the whole church can be blessed, rather than just the person praying and the person who is healed.

Remember the Message version of 1 Corinthians 12:7

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

Jesus saw a hunger in Bartimaeus that I think He still looks for today, and I think that hunger made the difference between him and the hundreds of other blind beggars there were in Judea at the time.

Many of us have been to meetings in Dudley or seen something of what God is doing in Florida. I think that one of the main differences is the degree of hunger for God.

And that counts both for people's hunger to meet with God and a hunger to be used by Him - so if anyone is willing to let go of any reputation and "security blankets" and join us in stepping out with prophetic words and words of knowledge, you are welcome, and God's eyes are on us.

3. Jesus asks the question **"What do you want me to do for you?"** (v.51)

Jesus often had words of knowledge, and Bartimaeus' blindness would have been very obvious, so on the face of it, this seems like a strange question. Jesus

wasn't asking because He didn't know what to do. Jesus' question would have prompted Bartimaeus to count the cost of what this decision meant; he would need to give up begging, find a job, and change his lifestyle.

As well as causing Bartimaeus to count the cost, it also squeezed faith out of him.

Bartimaeus starts well - declaring his faith in Jesus as Messiah; he then perseveres through opposition and decisively sets out to come to Jesus.

He has already demonstrated faith, which has caught Jesus' eye, but now Jesus pins him down to specifics - what do you want me to do for you...right now?

Bartimaeus asks for his sight, and Jesus fully, wonderfully meets and exceeds all his expectations. Faith like Bartimaeus' never fails to catch Jesus' eye.

As he heard the noise in the crowd approaching and realised that Jesus was coming close, he seized the chance.

Jesus is wonderfully close to us at the moment; and He is more determined than we are that we encounter Him.

Let's be reminded of what we know of Jesus - His Grace, His love for us; His power.

Let's grab the chance; count the cost and then press into Him.