

Go, your faith has made you well
Mark 10: 46-52
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 25 October 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

I thought I might have had to write two sermons for today, depending on the rugby result. One if we won; the other if we lost. Then the truth dawned on me. We have a number of South Africans in the congregation, but that could mean two things. Some of us will be on the winning side! But it would also mean that some of us would be on the losing side! And then another question. Should our theme be one of thanksgiving or should I be celebrating a requiem today? You can see that I had many weighty issues to deal with! This job is full of challenges! Just as well perhaps that I had to prepare this before the game started.

Let's start with the OT lesson for today. It's from Jeremiah. It was written when the people of Israel were in exile, miles away from their homeland. They'd been there for several generations. Indeed, some of them, many of them, had never known what it had been like back in Israel. Now my family came to NZ in the 1860s and 1870s and I don't have very much idea what life in England had been for them, even though I've studied the history of that period. I've got very little idea what it must have felt like.

What sustained the people of Israel was the promise that one day they would return to their own land. And today's lesson contains one of those messages of encouragement. The prophet writes:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth. With weeping they shall come and with consolations I will lead them back.

So far, so good. But note that among those words are these:

... among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour.

Interesting that those groups are specified. I would suggest that this means that all will be returned, not only those who are able-bodied and able to fend for themselves, but also those who might need a little bit of help. They're just as important as everyone else. This then is a message of **inclusion**.

Fast forward then to the Gospel reading. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's been heading there for quite a few chapters, but things kept happening along the way. They arrive in Jericho, only 15 miles out from the city, but then in the next verse we're told they are leaving. A large crowd gathered. Everyone was heading to Jerusalem for Passover. There were even more people than usual. But there in the middle of it all, in fact right on the roadside, this blind man calls out to Jesus, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*

He got no sympathy from the crowd. We read: *Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly.* All of which means they told Bartimaeus (that was his name) to shut up. A far cry from the message of inclusion we heard about earlier. I don't think any of us feel comfortable about awkward people,

whether it's the beggars we see in Queen Street or the men who want to wash our windscreen or the person who bails us up seeking a donation or the person who takes ages to get onto the bus or the kids we've never seen before who will knock on our doors this week demanding a response to a trick or a treat.

However, let's get back to this man, this blind man, this beggar – you see he was both blind and a beggar and more than likely had severe mental problems as well. We see quite a complex little dialogue going on here.

First, the beggar's request and then the crowd telling him to shut up because he's an embarrassment.

Second, the beggar makes the same request again. *Son of David, have mercy on me.* But this time Jesus has pity on him and says, *Call him here.* The people then tell the blind beggar, *Take heart, get up, he's calling you.*

Third, the man tosses his cloak aside and goes up to Jesus who asks him, *What do you want me to do for you?* We might ask ourselves, wasn't it obvious? Why did Jesus ask such an obvious question?

Fourth, the man's response, *My teacher, let me see again.*

Fifth, Jesus' response, *Go, your faith has made you well. And immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.* His response was one of faith and

that faith turned to discipleship. He followed Jesus and became one of his followers.

What should we make of all this? You may be sceptical; a bit dubious about healing miracles or faith healing. And I admit to being that way myself. My faith is a more rational one. I like to see concrete evidence of logic and order and reason rather than emotional responses and solutions seemingly from out of the blue. In fact, I think we can learn much from this story. Five things perhaps.

First, there's the sheer persistence of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. Nothing is going to stop him from coming face to face with Jesus. He wanted to meet the one person he longed to bring his troubles to. His wasn't just a vague, nebulous, sentimental wish to see Jesus, but a desperate desire. It's that desperate desire that gets things done.

Second, his response to the call of Jesus was immediate and eager. Some people say, 'Wait until I've done this or finished that. I'll be with you in just a minute'. But Bartimaeus was up like a shot – no messing around. He acted in the moment; if he'd waited his chance would have gone.

Third, he knew precisely what he wanted. Not like the person who goes to the dentist, but can't remember which tooth is sore! If we visit the doctor we usually know what we're there for. And so it was with this man. He knew what his problem was – he was blind. When we approach Jesus we should be as desperately definite as Bartimaeus.

Fourth, his understanding of Jesus was inadequate. *Jesus, Son of David*, he called him. But that suggested that Jesus was a conquering hero, a freedom fighter. A king who would lead Israel to national greatness. But that was far from what Jesus intended. Nevertheless, Bartimaeus had faith. Who among us has a fully adequate understanding of who Jesus is? Even if we haven't got it right the instinctive response we make is enough.

And fifthly, in the end there is one very special note. Bartimaeus may have been a beggar sitting beside the road, but he was a man of gratitude. He received his sight and then he followed Jesus. He didn't selfishly go as soon as he had been sorted out. No, he began with need and went on to gratitude and finished with loyalty. And that's a perfect summary of what discipleship – our discipleship - should be like in all its stages.