

Open our eyes

Our text this morning places us on the edge of Jericho, a city about 18 miles north east of Jerusalem and on the route that took pilgrims from all over the world to the holy city. And what do we know about Jericho? Well, we know for a start that it was one posh place. It was a wealthy agricultural centre, a fertile oasis near the Jordan River and King Herod built a winter capital there complete with palace, swimming pool and luscious gardens – a good place for a tyrant to relax and to chill out on his holidays. As such I imagine it was a place where beggars were not much welcomed. I imagine that when great King Herod visited his winter capital they rounded up the beggars and took them off the streets lest the king be disturbed by such riff-raff. Something else, however, that we know about Jericho is that over a thousand years before the scene depicted in our reading something dramatic had happened there. You may recall that day when a shout went up outside Jericho. You may recall how a besieging army were commanded to shout – and the walls of the city came tumbling down. Well, now, on this occasion, a shout is heard once again, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Only this time it is not the walls that fall but the scales on the eyes of the one who shouted. And suddenly Bartimaeus, afflicted with blindness, can see.

We could, of course, view this incident as just one more healing miracle by Jesus, but actually there is far more significance to this story than that. In fact it brings to a conclusion a section of Mark’s Gospel which could be said to be concerned with blindness. The section begins back in Chapter 8 where Jesus heals another blind man – bathing his eyes with spittle. And this is the prelude to a whole series of incidents that are linked by the metaphor of blindness and sight. So, immediately after that healing incident Jesus questions his disciples about who they think he is, and Peter in a moment of inspiration blurts out that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed. And Jesus immediately goes on to speak of how he must suffer and die in Jerusalem for he is to be a very different kind of Messiah from what is expected. Peter, though, will have none of it and tries to silence Jesus for he totally fails to understand what Jesus is about – in other words he’s blind! He doesn’t see Jesus properly. And that incident is immediately followed by Jesus taking Peter and James and John up a mountain and there Jesus is transfigured – he shines like the sun. Up there these disciples

2

eyes are opened to see Jesus bathed in the glory of heaven. In other words they see him with unclouded vision, blind no more. And as we read on in those chapters we come to two incidents where Jesus' disciples are again shown to be blind, figuratively speaking. In the first the disciples are arguing over who is the greatest – what else would you expect them to talk about on those long journeys with Jesus? And in the second incident James and John ask Jesus a favour and when Jesus asks them, 'what do you want me to do for you?' it turns out that they want the top positions in the government that they think Jesus is going to set up in Jerusalem once he is acclaimed there as Messiah. James and John were there on the Mount of Transfiguration and had their eyes opened and yet still their vision is dull and blurred. What the disciples are on about is power games and prestige and pecking orders, and they are as blind as bats to who Jesus really is and what his mission is all about.

And now comes Bartimaeus, to bring this section of Mark's gospel to a close. And he calls out to Jesus, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' He knows what Jesus is about. He knows that this Son of David has power to transform his life. And when many try to silence him he shouts out even more loudly, 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!' and his cry stops Jesus in his tracks. Jesus stood still, we're told. And he calls Bartimaeus over. And just note this. We're told that Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, springing up and coming to Jesus. And just think for a moment of that gesture of throwing off that cloak. After all, what did that cloak stand for? What did it signify? Well, it was probably one of Bartimaeus' only possessions for a start and Bartimaeus is ready to throw it away and to follow Jesus. Earlier in this chapter a man of great wealth had come and asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus had told him to sell them all his possessions and to give the money to the poor – but he couldn't. He was too attached to them. But Bartimaeus is to ready to throw what he had away! And that cloak of course was also what he collected his begging money in and he is ready to throw all that away too. He is ready to become a new person, no longer dependent upon others, no longer safe in his little blind, begging world. He's ready for the risk of following Jesus, primed for the radical insecurity and trust that comes with being a disciple.

In other words, to sum it all up, this blind man, this blind beggar by the roadside at the edge of the city of Jericho, this outcast, this wretch, this reject already sees more than Peter, already sees more than James and John, already sees more than the disciples, already sees more than the rich man, already sees

more than the crowd who want to keep him in his place. He is already more possessed of vision than those who think they can see. And when Jesus asks him the same question he had put earlier to James and John, ‘what do you want me to do for you?’ - where they had jockeyed for position and prestige Bartmaeus just asks to see. He already sees so much – but he wants to see more, to see more clearly, more truthfully.

‘What do you want me to do for you?’ I wonder how you would answer Jesus’ question. It’s the salvation question, the question of what being saved might mean for you. What do you want Jesus to do for you? What would be your reply? I want peace with God. I want release from guilt and shame. I want a job. I want to be healed. I want my loved one back. I want greater faith. I want my children to have a future. There are any number of answers to that question, any number of answers to what salvation might mean for us. But Mark is telling us that deep down salvation means having our eyes opened and our vision cleared – in other words learning to see the world differently. That gets to the heart of Mark’s Gospel and it gets to the heart of the Christian faith from which everything else follows.

For example, think of Jesus and how we see him. In the chapters that follow in Mark Jesus will be seen as a heretic and blasphemer and as political subversive and executed as a result. But what do we see as Christians? As Christians we see the one who is before all things, the one through whom all things came to be, the one through whom all things hold together. That’s quite a shift of perspective! Or again, soon Mark will present us with Jesus hanging on a cross, abandoned and forsaken by everyone, even God. The world sees one more unfortunate, one more victim of injustice, one more loser chewed up and spat out by a cruel and vicious system. But what do we see as Christians when we look at Christ on the cross? We see God in Christ reconciling the world to himself! Or think again of this section of Mark’s gospel that we’ve thought about. Here is a world where the disciples and that wealthy young man are attached to power and possessions and status. But we are directed to a blind beggar banished to the outskirts of a posh resort, for in our vision the first come last and the last come first and the blind see and the sighted are blind. And we could go on. Look out at the heavens and the stars and the wonders of creation and the world sees a glorious accident without meaning or purpose or plan. But as Christians what do we see? ‘The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork!’ It’s a different vision! And what do we

see when we look at a human being? Do we see a collection of atoms, a mere product of the cruel process of natural selection and nothing more? Or what about a refugee? What do we see? A threat to our way of life, an alien who will take away our jobs and our homes? Or do we see someone graced with the image of God? Indeed do we see Christ himself, as he himself told us to see him in the stranger and the naked and the starving. Everything hinges on how we see. Everything hinges on how we imagine the world.

At the very end of Mark's Gospel a group of frightened and bewildered women standing outside an empty tomb that no longer held the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth are told, 'you will see him in Galilee'. You will see him! And to be saved is to be launched on that great adventure of having our eyes opened to see Christ in the world, to see Christ in creation, to see Christ in the suffering and in the face of the stranger.

On that day in Jericho it seemed a strange thing for Jesus to say to Blind Bartimaeus. Why would you ask a blind beggar, 'what do you want me to do for you?' What do you expect? It's a no-brainer! Well, no. That man's answer, 'My teacher. Let me see again' speaks of the very secret of salvation.

'I one as lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see...'

Loving, compassionate, God,
open our eyes to see you in our world
and in one another.

Open our eyes, we pray, to see the world
as your handiwork, and so to treat it as such.

We remember the Philippines, recently struck by a typhoon.

We pray for those affected,
and for organisations seeking to bring relief and aid.

And we pray for the people of Mexico as they prepare
for a massive hurricane soon to hit their Pacific coast.

O God help them in the defence of their communities
and we pray that the impact of this disaster will be lessened.

Gracious God, open our eyes to what we can do
to help the strife-torn regions of the earth
and to reach out to those at risk.

And loving God,
as we think today of blind Bartimaeus
we are told that there are 39 million blind people
In our world, 80% of whose blindness could have been
prevented or cured.

We pray for charities like Sightsavers who work
to support the blind and to eradicate blindness.
Bless and prosper the work, we pray.

And God we continue to pray for the peace of the world.
We pray once more for an end to conflict between Israel
and the Palestinian communities.
We pray for justice and security and recognition for all.
And we continue to hold before you the refugee crisis
and the conflict in Syria that is feeding it.

And loving God,
as our social events committee meets later today,
we pray for the life of our church,
that we may be a community bound together in Christ.
Bless us in the sharing of food,
And in our outreach to our community.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen,