

PJob 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

October 28th 2018

Lord, open our eyes

This morning, as usual, we focus upon Bible passages that are set by what is called the Revised Common Lectionary, a programme of Bible readings for the year that many churches follow. And today a passage from the Old Testament book of Job has been paired with one from Mark's Gospel, and sometimes you discern links and connections between the passages and sometimes you don't. Well, this morning I hope we will see how appropriate it is that these two passages are linked.

To begin with, both texts concern people who have suffered and it's worth considering briefly each of their stories. Take Job. Go back to the beginning, to Job chapter 1, and he is described as 'the greatest of all people of the east' – a man of extraordinary wealth, whose vast flocks of livestock are listed at some length. But then comes disaster. All his livestock and his servants are destroyed, his house collapses in a violent wind and all his children perish in the rubble. And his health collapses too as his body is covered with sores and lesions. Such is the tragedy that befalls Job. And Job begins by meekly accepting what has happened to him - but then he wants to know why. As we say today, he 'pushes back' against God. And the book explores possible reasons for Job's suffering, but he never does get the answers he is looking for. What he does get, however, in the end is an overwhelming experience of God, what we might call an epiphany, a disclosure of the immensity of God - God's sheer mystery and otherness which is far beyond human understanding. God's answer to Job in effect is to say, 'who are you to question me? What do you know? Where were you when I called forth creation in all its wonder and marvel and complexity? And before such a revelation of majesty and might, Job is silenced.

The figure we meet in our reading from Mark is very different. It's unlikely that he has ever been wealthy and powerful like Job. Bartimaeus, as he is called, is a blind beggar who would be well accustomed to poverty and hardship. All he owns is his cloak which keeps him warm at night and in which he collects money by day. He could not be further from Job, 'the greatest of all people in the east'. He is one of the wretched of the earth, condemned to scrape for a living and dependent upon the charity of others. Yet he is, of course, linked to Job by his suffering. And we find him sitting by the Jericho roadside

and what we see in him is a picture of the true disciple – and make no mistake, this is what Mark is doing here. He is portraying this blind man as an image of true discipleship.

So, for a start, Bartimaeus is drawn to Jesus. Possibly he has heard of what Jesus has been doing, healing people, giving sight back to the blind, and for him Jesus is his last hope. And he cries out, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me!’ He has insight into who Jesus is. He senses that this Jesus is the Son of David, the long-awaited Messiah. And he cries out to Jesus for mercy, and the crowds that are following Jesus and who line the street try to shut him up, sternly ordering him to be quiet. But that only makes him shout out all the more. He will not be silenced! He will not be kept from Jesus. And Jesus hears Bartimaeus’ cries. Jesus hears him and summons him, ‘Call him here!’ And Bartimaeus springs up, throwing off his cloak: his one solitary possession he throws and he follows Jesus. Just a couple of chapters back we find a story - we looked at it a couple of weeks ago – of a man, a rich man who came to Jesus because he wanted eternal life. And Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and to give them to the poor and to follow him but he couldn’t do it. He was too attached to his wealth. And here is a poor beggar throwing away all that he has because he is ready for discipleship.

Then something else extraordinary: Jesus speaks to him, and what does he say? He says, ‘what do you want me to do for you?’ What a question! What does Jesus think Bartimaeus wants him to do for him? ‘My teacher, let me see again!’ Isn’t that obvious? Well, maybe – but we’ve heard that question before. Again, just after that rich man came to Jesus and then turned away from Jesus because of his wealth two of his disciples, James and John, came to him. And what does Jesus say to them? Same thing: ‘what is it you want me to do for you?’ only their answer is different. They want status. They want to sit at Jesus right and left hand when he is made king. They want to share in his power and position. But Bartimaeus just wants salvation, healing, wholeness. He just wants mercy. Unlike James and John he is ready for discipleship. And the story ends with the words, ‘Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.’ And in Mark’s Gospel ‘the way’ is code for discipleship, for the way of Christ, and so Bartimaeus is presented to us as the true follower, the true disciple.

So we have Job and we have Bartimaeus, two very different people, linked by suffering. But there is one other thing that they have in common and

this is where I think it so creative to link these two passage together. What they share in common is that both of them had their eyes opened. Take Job. We have heard of his suffering, of his questioning, of the overwhelming experience of God's power and majesty that finally silenced him. And in the passage that we read from chapter 42 Job finally yields to God and submits and note what he says. Referring to his former experience of God he says in verse 5: 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you...' 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear': in other words previously I knew of you by repute, from what I'd heard of you – but now my eyes see you! Somehow Job had had a fresh experience of God, his eyes had been opened, he knew God in a new way, a more direct and personal way. And of course that is what links Job to Bartimaeus. He heard Jesus coming along the road. His ears were attuned to Christ, but then his eyes were opened and he saw.

Note, however, the difference between what Job saw and what Bartimaeus saw. Job saw a God supremely transcendent and above him, a God far beyond human comprehension, a mysterious God whose ways no-one can fathom, a God who we dare not question and whom we can only serve. And what did Bartimaeus see? He saw a God who in Christ comes alongside him on the road, a God who calls Bartimaeus to him, a God who says to him, 'what do you want me to do for you?' Is this the same God that Job saw? Well, the mystery of our faith tells us that it is indeed. The inscrutable God, the God above and beyond, the God who silences our questions, comes to us as a servant and says, 'what do you want more to do for you? And our faith hangs in the balance between the two: the God beyond us and the God with us; the God we are called to serve and the God who comes in Christ to serve us. And in our walk with God we experience both. At times we confront sheer mystery and we are humbled and silenced. And at times we hear that still, small voice, 'what do you want me to do for you'? And we need to embrace both. On the one hand we cannot tame God. After all, we are mere creatures before our Creator who does not give us answers to all our questions and we can only bow in submission. But on the other hand we are called by this God as Bartimaeus was, as he reaches out to us, and we receive mercy and grace, and we receive a new boldness to ask of God what we long for, what we yearn for that our lives may be full. And I wonder what you need to see this morning. Maybe this morning you need a fresh vision of Job's God for your God is too small, too tame, a God made in your image. Or maybe this morning you need a fresh

vision of God's grace, his passion for you, his desire to bless you and to walk with you along the way.

For both Job and Bartimaeus, however, salvation consists of having their eyes opened. You see there are many images of salvation in the Bible. In the Bible salvation means being reconciled to God and being forgiven; or salvation means being numbered among God's special people, God's new family; or salvation means being healed in body, mind or spirit. These are all glimpses of salvation. But here salvation involves a new way of seeing: a new way of seeing God, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new way of seeing other people, a new way of seeing the world. The Christian writer C S Lewis says something profound about Christian belief. He says, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.' Think about that. Our faith in Christ gives us a new vision of God, but with it a new vision of everything else. So the disciple looks at the universe and sees not a huge accident but a lovingly created arena for God's glory. And the disciple looks around and sees not the Jobs of this world, the rich and the powerful, as blessed by God but the meek and the pure in heart – they shall see God. And the disciple looks in the eyes of the poor and the outcast and the wretched of the earth and sees the eyes of Christ staring back. And the disciple looks in the mirror and sees someone who is not God, someone who is flawed and failed, and maybe hurt, but who is loved immeasurably and who is called by name.

The Christian faith is often spoken of in terms of newness – a new birth, a new heart. But what we also need are new eyes, new vision, new sight. Then we may be changed and our world changed.

Living God – mysterious God of Job and gracious God of Bartimaeus, open our eyes that we may see. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
eternal sovereign over all,
dweller in light inaccessible,
we bow and worship you.
The world is charged with your glory;
your radiance illumines all things;
the light of your presence seeps through all created being,
shining from you, the Maker, the Source.
And when we glimpse you,
what can we do but praise you?
Sensing you our spirits rise into song
and we are enlivened, and energised
and vibrant life pulses through us.
For to see you is life, and light, and truth and joy.
But God we do not see you clearly
for we are blinded by our sins.
We are people whose vision is dim
and we see through a glass darkly.
And so we are dull, and listless,
and our lives are bereft of praise.
So we confess to you our sin, our blindness,
and we long to see clearly and truly.
O God, open our eyes that we may see.
Spit upon them and cleanse them
and restore our vision,
and we pray together in the words that Jesus
taught us, saying...