

Bartimaeus: a model disciple

A sermon preached by Nick Moir on Sunday 28 October

Hebrews 7.23-28, Mark 10.46-52

He doesn't say 'Jesus, son of David' – not in the Greek anyway – but 'Son of David, Jesus'. Mark at least is bringing the 'Son of David' bit to the fore. The previous scene in the gospel begins with the two disciples approaching Jesus to ask that they may sit at his right and left hand in his glory. Those disciples are called 'James and John, the sons of Zebedee' – that was conventional, the name followed by whose son you were. Mark promotes 'Son of David' as if to emphasise it: it is not so much a name as a title, a messianic title. The blind beggar Bartimaeus who utters this is the first to proclaim Jesus's messiahship without being sternly spoken to. Simon Peter who proclaims 'You are the Christ' two chapters earlier is sternly ordered, it says, not to tell anyone about him. The others who proclaim Jesus's identity are demons and they too are silenced. But now as we draw near to Jerusalem things are to come into the open. The next scene is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when the combination of the donkey of Old Testament prophecy and the proclamation of the crowds leaves us in no doubt that they are welcoming the Rabbi from Nazareth as the Messiah. Bartimaeus foreshadows it: he throws off his cloak in order to come to Jesus and in the next scene the disciples 'throw their cloaks' on the donkey and the crowds 'spread their cloaks' as well as their palms along the way.

But there are two sons in our gospel reading, just as there are two sons in the story that precedes it. There is the Son of David, but there is also the son of Timaeus. And again it doesn't say 'Bartimaeus son of Timaeus' as it ought to have done and in the word order Mark and others use elsewhere. Again it swaps it round. It says 'The son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus'. And perhaps here Mark is making a point. Timaeus in Greek means Honour or Precious. Maybe Mark is here contrasting Bartimaeus with the two sons of Zebedee who went before – who, remember, were seeking honour – to sit at the right and the left. Perhaps Mark is saying that that position really belongs to the man who is sitting with a begging bowl on the road out of Jericho, the true son of Honour. Many, Mark tells us, sternly tell him to be quiet. Earlier in the chapter there is another scene where the disciples sternly speak to people who are trying to bring little children to Jesus. 'Let the little children come to me...', he says, 'for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs... whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (10.14-15).

Bartimaeus is an exemplar of the beatitudes, of the meek who will inherit the earth. And in Mark's eyes he is the model disciple, who is called by Jesus (v49), came to Jesus (v50), believes in Jesus (v52), is saved by Jesus (v52), and followed Jesus along the way (v52).

We know his name because Mark knew his name and that's probably because the early Church knew his name – he was one of them. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if he were an inspiration to them not only in terms of discipleship but as a man or prayer. Apart from the Lord's prayer, the oldest words of a prayer we can trace back to the time of Jesus are Bartimaeus's (and one or two others in the gospels) – 'have mercy'. In the Greek 'eleison'. The Greek words were never translated into the Latin liturgy but remained 'Kyrie eleison', 'Christe, eleison'. A longer form of Bartimaeus's prayer had the title of Jesus slightly expanded and some extra words added from the mouth of the tax collector in one of Jesus's stories. It was taken into the desert by the Desert Fathers of the 3rd century and became what is known as the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy

on me, a sinner.’ It is a prayer that when used repeatedly engrains itself into your soul and almost continues praying in you when you think you have stopped. When I pray the Jesus prayer I become Bartimaeus, sitting with his begging bowl beside the way, crying out repeatedly to Jesus until he passes by. It is a way of being persistent in prayer. Which reminds me...

On Friday I gave Eleanor a new title. I called her ‘the importunate widow’. Do you know where that’s from? It’s from the King James Bible in the story told in Luke 18 by Jesus about our need ‘to pray always and not lose heart’. The parable is about a widow who seeks justice from a judge who wasn’t much interested, but grants her justice to stop her bothering him. Eleanor, you see, has been trying to get an email address out of me and I keep forgetting. She must have asked in different ways about half a dozen times. Leaving Vespers on Friday afternoon she had just gone round the corner but then called out again to remind me. ‘The importunate widow’, I called her, promising that I’d do it when I got home. But of course by the time I got home it has slipped my mind again. 45 minutes later an email arrives, entitled ‘Knock, knock’. ‘...that email address would be super, please... Thank you E’. This time the stern-hearted, and muddle-memored, judge granted her wish and signed off with the reference ‘Matthew 7.7’, which says ‘Ask, and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.’

Persist in prayer. At St Andrew’s we are going to have a special week of prayer in a month’s time, leading up to St Andrew’s Day on 30 November. The aim is both to pray and also to learn how to pray, so if you’re the sort of person who thinks ‘O, prayer, I’m not very good at that. That’s what the holy lot do.’ – then this week is just for you. We’re going to have three strands to the week. In the first part of the week we want people to take 45 minutes out to pray in triplets, with two other people in other words. It will be a one-off, but I hope an experience that will be a significant one for many of us. We tried this in the ministry team about a year ago and it was really good – we not only prayed but also deepened our sense of fellowship and friendship. Now if you’d like to take part, John Reynolds is the man to talk to. He is going to be our match-maker. And then at the end of the week we are going to have a day of prayer when we are going to ask people to come and pray here in the chancel for an hour. It will be especially decorated with aids to prayer – words, pictures, smells, icons, bibles – that will help us to engage meaningfully. And, thirdly, we are hoping to install a prayer net flowing out of St Andrew up there, which anyone visiting the church can use to make a prayer – more of that anon.

Our role model, apart from St Andrew, will be Bartimaeus. Our aim will be to pray persistently, open-handedly and expectantly – not just for our well-being and wholeness but with and for the world Christ came to save. Our prayer is for the coming of his kingdom, beginning in our lives but spreading out into the whole world.