

Pentecost 21B, 25th October, 2009

Bartimaeus: Whose Blindness?

Mark 10:46-52

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The story of Bartimaeus confronts us head-on with issues of marginalisation: who decides who is worthy to be acknowledged, included, healed and saved by Christ? And on what basis? This story –one of many like it – calls us to view our attitudes about people from God's perspective, and calls us to question old or long-held beliefs. It in fact may call us to fresh attitudes and fresh starts – to repentance and conversion.

It used to be so clear cut – until Jesus, anyway. In first century Mediterranean Jewish culture to be different (like being diseased or disabled or being a woman on her own), brought shame on your family; it distanced you from any patronage and meant ostracism. You certainly didn't have a voice; it was scandalous for nobodies to speak up in public. The marginalised knew their place, and everyone knew who they were. They were not welcome at the altar; and they were treated as second class or non-citizens.

Bartimaeus apparently hadn't got the message: he refuses to let others tell him that he is not worthy to speak to Jesus. He keeps shouting, and Jesus hears him, invites him to come to him, and heals him. And Bartimaeus begins to follow Jesus.

But this is not just a story about Bartimaeus. It's very much a story of the crowds who gather around Jesus. It's a story of Jesus challenging what has been the religious and social rules. He's breaking in a new order, with a new vision of universal human dignity. There was to be no more human rule-making about who was acceptable, because all human life was treasured by God. Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection power was for all of creation. All of humanity, regardless of who they are and what they've done, is invited to respond to Christ's call.

God is still challenging us today; challenging followers of Jesus who still want to define who can be in and who can be out. Gender: still an issue 2,000 years on in many churches, yet Jesus clearly included women amongst his key disciples; sexuality – homosexuals are the new Bartimaeuses, outcasts in the Church, yet sexuality was never a concern for Jesus –sexual immorality was a concern to the early church, but not homosexuality as such. It was lack of mercy and justice that Jesus named as the greatest sins.

To get a little clearer –what I believe the Scriptures are saying, is that God's call –to follow Christ, to be in relationship with him - is for everyone, no exceptions. And it is the choice of each person whether to respond. And for each person who does respond, regardless of whatever lifestyle, sin, or human condition that's formed their lives before responding to Christ, there's a further call to align all of their behaviour –sexual and otherwise – to Christ's ethic of love – with fidelity, honesty, responsibility, integrity and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole.

But where the damage is, and has been, is where people promote themselves to judge; and make up their own rules about who's acceptable to God. Like the crowds around blind Bartimaeus, who tried to tell him – “you're blind, you do not fit *our* religious and majority definitions of normal and OK; so you're not worthy; you're not in”.

It's not just that these followers try to stop the outsider getting near Jesus; it's that this excluding behaviour shoves Christ to one side in their own lives, showing the need for their eyes to be opened; the need for conversion – for turning around and being able and open to hear Christ say “call him here”, to let go of old beliefs and doctrines that are unsupported by, or belittle, the Scriptures, deny God's grace and love, and negate Jesus' message and very life and death for us..

The invitation here is for us to search ourselves – can we see ourselves in this story or similar ones? Are we with the crowds keeping people who don't fit the bill, at arm's length, silent, away from Jesus, believing that person's sin or personhood is too ugly to warrant God's love? Or perhaps you're with the crowd turning around to help Bartimaeus come to Jesus after you yourself hear Jesus say "Call him here"? Do you align with the outcast ones, knowing God's great healing love and acceptance, desiring to make that known and to share that gift with others?

Or maybe you don't really care, or you've not cared to really listen to God and reflect for yourself; maybe your parents, or someone else you respected in your past, told you to think in a particular way, or that one way of reading the Bible was absolute, and you don't see why you should question that or change, or even listen. It's sad how common that is in the Church. As we echo Jesus "call him/her here", to see the deaf and inactive, the blind and unresponsive, in the midst of those who gather around Jesus.

Later in this service we have opportunity to listen; simply to be open to the voices of one group of today's Bartimaeusesⁱ; to hear their very varied responses of faith to God's call. Like the story of Bartimaeus, it challenges any judgements we might want to make about who's in and who's out. Will you allow yourselves to simply listen, and reflect deeply on your own responses?

ⁱ Towards the end of the service, we listened to the (taped) stories of lesbian and gay people in their experiences of faith and of Church. This is what the Australian Anglican Church organised as part of its "Listening Process" which came from the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion. See the post on the "latest news and reflections" page of the website.