

Sermon from Sunday 24th October

Take heart; get up, he is calling you.....

I think that this story may be as much about Jesus healing the spiritual blindness of the surrounding crowd as it is about Bartimaeus. Though Bartimaeus is the literally blind man in the story, it's the crowd — the blind man's peers, his culture, his society — that renders him **unseen**.

To the eyes of the crowd, the blind man by the roadside is invisible.

How does this challenge us as to what **we** choose to ignore?

Who or what is our unseen in our world?

Whose shouts and cries are not worthy of our attention or too discomfoting to listen to?

Yesterday as we walked to the cathedral for the COP 26 Vigil we set out from Vauxhall Station to walk and pray the route along the south bank and I had in mind certain focal points – the Sea Life Centre to pray for the oceans but before we reached it we were brought up short by a group of people on the foreshore dressed in buoyancy aids. Waders, crash helmets standing around life size inflated models of a sperm whale, dolphin and seal, they were 'Marine Life Rescue' needing to practice because human activity and climate change increasingly confuses the patterns of behaviour of our sibling marine mammals and their sophisticated ways of communicating and caring for each other – the cries of creation so often invisible laid out for us there on the foreshore of the Thames.

We walked on towards the Houses of Parliament where I planned to pause and pray for those in power but once again the invisible grief and loss on our doorstep and the doorstep of power was made visible when we were stopped in our tracks by the Covid Memorial Wall – none of us had anticipated this moment and in the face of such a powerful reminder of our recent and ongoing pandemic we walked the full length in silence.

We had set out to listen to and pray for creation in a place where each of us would normally stride on with purpose and expectancy of some distraction or other offered to us in this great metropolis but to walk attentive to our surroundings, to walk deliberately and prayerfully meant that we saw a different world and were more open to the cries by opening our hearts to God in those places.

and once there we had to face the cries of creation

Bartimaeus was a blind man is deemed beyond the horizon of sight in first century Israel.

Who or what is beyond the horizon of our sight?

To the crowd his suffering is not important enough to warrant tenderness, patience, or even curiosity.

Whose suffering in our world is not enough - sadly I know for me the list is too, too long

Here the invisible one dares to speak out and in this story the efficient thing to do is to shut him up.

All too often in our own world too, the priority is to restore order very quickly, in the face of anyone shouting out the truth we often hunker down and do everything we can to re-establish the social hierarchy, and maintain a status quo that keeps the privileged comfortable.

But that comfort is precisely what Jesus renders impossible.

Once the crowd **sees** Bartimaeus, they can't **unsee** him.

Once Jesus opens their eyes to his full humanity, they must respond with compassion: “Take heart; get up; he is calling you.”

Which is why I wonder if in some way Jesus heals the crowd *first* so that they can, in turn, participate in Bartimaeus’s healing.

How could we be healed as a country to become a healing nation?

What the blind man needs is not physical sight alone; he also needs visibility and validation within his community. In our context, in the UK in 2021 there are so many rendered invisible and particularly here in Chaldon we can ignore the needs of others. How do we as a church community remain open to the cries of the poor, the cries of the earth, when to all intents and purposes all looks well outside our front doors?

So this is in a way a *double* miracle story, Jesus makes visible the invisible – and gives Bartimaeus visibility and validation.

Who in our world points out, makes visible, validates?

Marcus Rashford and free school meals, Greta Thunberg with climate change and for us yesterday it was the Covid Memorial Wall -the pandemic, Marine Mammal rescue – our non human neighbours.

For his part in his blindness Bartimaeus sees what the crowd does not. He calls Jesus “Son of David,” a title Jesus doesn’t make public during his ministry. The Gospels make clear that Jesus’s true identity remains hidden from most people until after the Resurrection

Most of Jesus’s followers are too busy seeing what they *want* to see — a magician, a political and military leader, a carpenter’s son, a wise man — to notice what the blind man — free of all such filters — discerns so quickly: Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God.

We might say, then, that this is one of the rare and beautiful moments in the Gospels when Jesus himself is truly *seen*.

Bartimaeus sees Jesus as wholly and purely as Jesus sees Bartimaeus; the gaze and the recognition in this story are mutual.

I wonder if Jesus stops and stands still precisely *because* the blind man surprises and delights him with this visionary gift. “Teacher, I see you.”

How wonderful it is to be seen, acknowledged, recognised for what we really are, our true selves, that is what Jesus did for those he encountered - that is the gift to us if we can be open to it.

I am in awe of the trust Bartimaeus has in Jesus by the end of this story — a trust deep enough to enable him to cast aside what’s most familiar and safe, in exchange for “a way” that is new, and full of uncertainty. In shedding his cloak, Bartimaeus sheds what has rooted him to the spot and instead takes on his real self which has been recognised and acknowledged.

When that happens to us, we can become miracle workers because we are rooted in our hearts desire and not burdened by accretions from the world as we walked on past Westminster Bridge we experienced a sudden contrast and all that we as a society use to distract ourselves from the modern day Bartimaeus – crowds and crowds of people queueing for The London Dungeon, The London Eye, The Shrek Experience, The Sea Life Centre - none of them the real thingWhen are those moments found- when are the accretions of wealth and the western world lost and the truth revealed

Perhaps in a new born baby, an encounter at the foodbank, a butterfly, a piece of music, the wind in the trees.....you will have your own.

In regaining true sight, in setting out on “the way,” Bartimaeus becomes a disciple, a traveller, a pilgrim. He commits himself without looking back. He strains forward instead of clinging to his past.

He is, in the truest sense, born again.

Finally — and this for me is the most precious thing, Jesus asks Bartimaeus to articulate his heart’s desire.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

In one sense, for it’s a bizarre question. Isn’t it obvious what Bartimaeus wants Jesus to do for him? He’s a blind beggar!

But Jesus asks, he doesn’t presume, he wants us to arrive at the knowledge ourselves.

He doesn’t reduce Bartimaeus to his blindness.

He honours the fullness and complexity of a real human being who likely has many desires, many longings, and many needs.

On revisiting this sermon at home last night I messaged the prayer walk whats app group.....

‘What is jumping off the

page at me are these words ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you..’ So much to process from the day – marine mammals, covid deaths, friendship, monolithic structures - what are we called to do?’

In asking the question, Jesus invites Bartimaeus into the honest self-reflection essential to growth and healing and love of self from which we can love others genuinely and create miracles world.

So.....Jesus asks each of us -

What is in your heart?

What do you long for?

What do you imagine I desire for you?

Where in your deepest desires might we find each other?

What are we called to do ? As individuals? As a community? As a nation?

What does following in ‘the way’ mean today?

It is at once a lovely and a terrifying question.

It calls for radical honesty.

Radical vulnerability.

Radical trust.