

Homily: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

It's a sad part of life that if you walk down any high street in the country, you're likely to see someone begging on the pavement. Most people simply walk past; a few will stop and give a bit of spare change; some will even try to start up a conversation with the person who is begging. Very few of us, though, if any, really feel that we can make a genuine, lasting difference to that person's life. We can help, we can show kindness, but it seems impossible to make any fundamental change.

Presumably, then, most people begging on the street have fairly limited expectations. A few pounds collected probably means it's been a good day. No doubt this is how it was for Bartimaeus. A blind man, he was unable to work, so had to beg in order to survive. He must have sat down each day, hoping to catch the attention of passers-by and to be given a few coins. On this particular day, as Passover was drawing near, many people were making their way up to Jerusalem for the feasts, so perhaps he hoped to have an unusually good income. But he can't have expected what actually happened: his hope of a few coins must have faded into complete insignificance when he was given back the gift of his sight.

There's a real irony in the Gospel: in many ways, blind Bartimaeus is the man who sees most clearly. He recognises Jesus as the "Son of David" – one of the titles given to the expected Messiah – and he is so determined to see the Lord that he shows great courage, even when scolded by the large crowd. He's a good example to all of us: sometimes we too have to cut through the busyness of life, the noise of crowd, the opposition of others, if we want really to meet the Lord. And when we do this – when we really encounter Him – He can far exceed our expectations, just as He did for Bartimaeus. Perhaps we can learn a lot from this blind man. "Don't give up when faith is hard", he tells us; "Don't allow the noise of life or the scepticism of others to hold you back from really seeking the Lord with all your heart. The rewards are amazing."

Over the last few weeks we've heard, several times, that Jesus is making a journey. Along the road we've met many characters, and we've noted on a few occasions the lack of understanding shown by Jesus' disciples. They have been blind to what He's doing, unable to understand what He's teaching them. Today they enter the last leg of their journey. Jesus is going to Jerusalem, where He will die. He encounters Bartimaeus as He leaves Jericho, only around 15 miles from the Holy City. Having travelled the road with many who do not understand Him, and having met some who were unable to respond to His call, Jesus now meets a man who responds perfectly. It's no accident that this man is a blind beggar, a man who knows his need, his dependence, on others and on the Lord. It's hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, Jesus has taught on the way; now He meets a poor man who is able to follow Him. Last week, we heard James and John come to Him with a request. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked them in reply. Their request was for seats at His right and His left – in other words, places of glory. But when Jesus puts the same question to Bartimaeus, he simply asks, "Lord, let me see again." He recognises Jesus' power to heal. And do you remember the rich young man who approached Jesus, asking how he could gain eternal life? He went away sad, because Jesus asked the man to sell

everything and follow Him. But when Jesus calls to Bartimaeus today, we're told that the beggar jumps up and throws off his cloak. Then, with his sight restored, he followed Jesus along the road. "Give up everything and follow me." As a beggar, Bartimaeus had almost nothing, but even the one thing he did have – his cloak – he throws aside so that he can come to Jesus and follow Him wholeheartedly along the road.

And where does the road lead? To Jerusalem. The very next scene in St Mark's Gospel is the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The people take off their cloaks and lay them on the road before Jesus, and they cry "Hosanna to the Son of David". Bartimaeus, who called on the "Son of David" to help him and who threw off his cloak in response to the Lord's call, must have been there to witness this joyful scene. I wonder what happened in the days following. When Jesus was crucified, was Bartimaeus nearby? Did he see the Lord hanging on the cross with his newly-restored sight? Did his spiritual sight, his faith, allow him to live through those days without losing his trust in the Son of David, the Messiah sent by God?

We know, of course, that the story did not end there. Jesus rose from the dead, and afterwards His followers, now filled with faith, went out to preach. For most of the healing miracles of Jesus, we don't know the name of the person who is healed. The fact that we know the name of Bartimaeus probably means that he was part of the early Christian community: his faith survived and so his name and his story were remembered by the early Church. Perhaps Bartimaeus even saw the risen Lord. When Jesus tells the crowd to call Bartimaeus over, they say to the beggar, "Courage! Get up, He is calling you." Actually, the original Greek of the New Testament says, "*Rise* up! He is calling you." The verb used is the same one Mark uses to describe Jesus being raised from the dead. What Bartimaeus experienced was not simply a few coins landing in his begging bowl. Nor was it simply the gift of sight. It was his rising to a new life, a life of faith in which he could follow Jesus. A life which extends beyond this earthly existence, into the joy of heaven. "Your faith has saved you", Jesus told him. Let's allow the powerful story of the blind beggar of Jericho to touch us, and his example to speak to us. Like Bartimaeus, may we not allow any obstacle to stop us from coming to Jesus; instead, let's invite the Lord to raise us up with Him to the life He offers.

Fr Andrew

