

Mk 10 46-52. Blind Bartimaeus.

When I read the NT, one of the things which strikes me the most is how different the early church was from our present day church. The NT church had a liveliness in the midst of very difficult circumstances and offered comprehensive solutions to people's problems. We tend to have various programs for one thing and another, the early church seemed to have an experience of God which was worth talking about.

Some people say that of course, the early church was different, that God arranged things differently to give the infant church a real boost to get it going. But I wonder whether that is true: we worship the same God that they did, we rely on the same death of the same Jesus and have the help of the same Holy Spirit. I wonder if there is anything which the NT church can teach us from today's reading about the healing of blind Bartimaeus.

I think that there are 3 useful things which we can learn :

- Bartimaeus showed real insight into the identity of Jesus.
- There was an expectation that Jesus could do something significant.
- Christ's prayer of healing followed the normal NT pattern of a command, not a prayer.

Bartimaeus' insight into Jesus.

I wonder who you think Jesus is. A godly prophet, a teacher of truth perhaps, or more correctly, God become a human being. Before we look at what Bartimaeus thinks, it is worth looking at the reaction of James and John in the preceding passage. Mark's gospel divides neatly into 2 halves. When Peter confesses in chapter 8 that Jesus is the Christ, he is the first human being to do so. This triggers something in Jesus and from then, He sets out for Jerusalem and death. Three times in chapters 8, 9 and 10 Jesus tells the disciples that He will be killed and then raised back to life three days later.

Each time that Jesus predicts His death, the disciples are shocked and respond in such a way as to show that they are more concerned with their position in the kingdom than with what will happen to Jesus. In chapter 8, Peter rebukes Jesus, in chapter 9 they all argue about who is the greatest and in chapter 10, James and John want the places of honour. In each case, their concern for self has made them completely deaf to Jesus' words. It is just as shocking as on being told of the imminent death of someone they care about, a person responds by saying, 'Make sure you include me in your will in a big way before you die!' It is really that bad.

By contrast with those who are constantly with Jesus, Bartimaeus is really in his own world. Probably for hours each day, he is alone with his thoughts. Apart from thanking donors, he has plenty of time to

think about this Jesus whom he has heard about but never seen. He concludes that Jesus is a descendant of King David, Son of David, and in Jewish terms, the Messiah. He calls this out at the top of his voice and is promptly told to be quiet by the crowd, who probably assume that Jesus has more important things to do. Worse, if the Romans hear that a descendant of one of Israel's greatest kings is around, they would see it as a threat. The most important thing to see in these first few verses is that only the blind man understands Jesus correctly, those who see physically are blind spiritually.

There was an expectation that Jesus could do something significant.

Sometimes, we may lack any real trust in God and try to sort things out ourselves, to avoid the embarrassment of unanswered prayer. There was no chance of this with Bartimaeus- he was blind, and either God healed him or he would remain blind. If we press on with God, He will want us to deal with our level of trust in Him. He may put us in situations where, like Bartimaeus, we have to trust Him. This is not evidence of His disfavour, but His fatherly care.

Sometimes, we may believe, in theory, certain things about Jesus but if we are going to see what God can do, we have to ask and trust God. A famed tight-rope walker came to Niagara Falls and crossed the rope many times, finishing by pushing a wheelbarrow blindfolded across the Falls. He said to the admiring crowds, 'Who believes that I can push someone in this barrow across the Falls?'. An over-

excited man said, 'I do!', at which point the tight-rope walker said 'Hop in.' To no-one's surprise, the man's intellectual faith did not translate into personal belief. If we are like this, we will not see what God can do.

Sometimes we ask and get no response from God because deep down, we do not believe that God can answer that particular prayer. The solution is not to give up but to ask God to show us what we believe He can answer, which is usually something much smaller. Having seen God at work, we can then work up to bigger things.

But when we ask, we need to be sure that what we are asking for, will glorify God. Jesus had asked James and John, 'What do you want me to do for you?' and they asked for glory for themselves. Jesus asked Bartimaeus, 'What do you want me to do for you?', and he asked perfectly naturally that he might see. Answering this prayer brought glory to God, showed the quality of His relationship with Jesus and restored Bartimaeus to mainstream society. That is why it was answered, and not James and John's prayer.

If we are going to see answered prayer, we have to ask according to our faith and ask for something that will glorify God when and if it is answered. But just like we do not give our children everything they ask, when they ask, God does the same for us. Our prayer may not be right at that time or it may be right, but we are not. We may

have unconfessed sin, we may not have forgiven someone, etc. We have to sort things out before God will answer us.

I used to work as a high school teacher on a casual or temporary basis, covering those who were sick or on leave. This worked well for the last 5 years. The longest I had to wait for work was a month in 2011. But 2012 was different. I did all the usual things, but in Term 1, I only received 3 offers of work which I could not accept. After months without work, I talked to my ministry supervisor after Easter. We figured out that I had not forgiven somebody, which I then promptly did. Term 2 started, and I was offered work 5 times in the first week. After that, I have had regular work until now. There is something about forgiveness which releases God's blessing, but when we withhold forgiveness, there are problems.

The normal NT pattern of a command, not a prayer.

When we ask God for healing, we tend to say something like "God, please heal my big toe, Bill's sore back, etc." The problem is that no recorded prayer for healing in the NT is like this. Rather, they are all commands. Jesus does not say, 'Father, please heal Bartimaeus' eyes' or 'Father, please heal the paralytic'; rather he said to Bartimaeus 'Go, your faith has healed you' and to the paralytic 'Get up, take your mat and go.' Jesus has taken the time to find out what God wants and then to command that will into action. What prevents

this being presumption, is Jesus listening to God and wanting to glorify God, not himself.

How then should we pray? Firstly, I think that we can learn from our children. Even when parents say no to their children, that does not mean that the children give up asking, and nor should we. We need to keep asking God for the things that we need as God loves to give things which strengthen our relationship with Him. When we get an answer of no, it may mean that the request is not right in itself, that it may not be the right time or that we are not right- we may need to look at our lives to see if anything is wrong.

Secondly, in a congregation of this size, there will usually be people who are gifted by God for prayer. They need to be found and encouraged to pursue this vital ministry. I can vouch for the fact that having someone praying who is actually gifted by God for that ministry, can produce remarkable results. We can and should wait on God for guidance on how to pray, but we should also pray that God will raise up in our midst, those He has gifted for prayer, that we too in our days, might see the blind and the sick healed, to God's greater glory.

Amen.