

Opening our hearts helps us see God

Sermon by Andy Wurm, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, 28th October 2018

In today's gospel passage there's an unnecessary explanation, of who Bartimaeus is, i.e. the son of Timaeus. It's unnecessary because Bartimaeus *means* son of Timaeus. Any Jew would have known that. It was probably a later addition, when the story was used in churches that were not Jewish. The fact that the story has been adapted like that, shows that it's not meant to be a fixed account of an event which occurred in the past, but something for the reader to engage with, in the present. We are meant to find ourselves in the story, or put ourselves into the story.

I suppose the most obvious character we might try to see ourselves as is Bartimaeus. It is possible the gospel-writer is making a point by using the name 'son of Timaeus'. Timaeus is a character from Plato's writings, who has a lot to say about the nature of the world. His reasoning demonstrates the power of human thought in grasping what the world is like. But the gospel-writer has him blind and begging, beside the road. In contrast, he could have been on the road, which is another way of saying on 'the Way', which was the phrase the early Christians used for following Jesus, or being Christian. Maybe the gospel-writer is suggesting that while our reasoning can get us close to God, it cannot get us all the way there. An example of that is Albert Einstein, who was fairly good at thinking about the nature of things and seemed to believe in a creator God. Such an idea can take you towards God, but won't necessarily lead you to the God who is love. It's important for us to use our reasoning when it comes to matters about God, because that's part of 'connecting it all together', but it's not going to be enough. This is not a foreign practice to us though, as we employ it in our relationships with one another. There rational thought is important, but we also need things like trust, vulnerability, compassion, joy and other things. So too when it comes to our relationship with God.

Bartimaeus' blindness is significant, especially because it represents a loss, i.e. in the past he could see, but now he cannot. He's lost sight of whatever it is that Jesus showed him. This sort of spiritual failure is common in Mark's gospel. His remedy for it is to start over again, but just as important is his reminding us that it happens. Even those closest to Jesus get it wrong. For those of us in the community of faith, it means we should not just expect others to always get it right, but rather, we have a mutual obligation to keep reminding each other of what we're on about. Conversely, when we do lose sight of what really matters, it's good to follow Bartimaeus' example of humility, represented in his begging by the roadside. And that's when we need to ask.

Jesus' request to Bartimaeus 'what do you want me to do for you?' isn't to illicit information. It wouldn't take a genius to work out what Bartimaeus wanted. This shows that asking is a necessary aspect of faith. It's not that God will only respond if we ask for something, but that asking represents our openness to God. Behind our asking is an assumption that God will give us what we need. That means while we may ask for something particular, we have to hold lightly our expectation of getting that particular thing, because it's just the springboard for our desire. Even though our requests to God may be selfish at times, they are also in some way, an expression of the promptings of the Holy Spirit within us. For that reason, it's worth paying attention to what our deepest desires are, for they can lead us to God.

Sometimes people are put off asking God for things because they don't get what they asked for. Their problem is making the mistake of focussing on what they receive. Asking God for something puts God at the centre. Focussing on what you receive puts yourself at the centre.

Bartimaeus wants to see again. He wants to see so that he can get on the road again. And we're told that's what he did – he 'followed (Jesus) on the way'. So, if we're Bartimaeus, what do we need to see, in order to follow in Jesus' Way? Presumably it must be something attractive, or we wouldn't be drawn along. So if we say that Jesus is the way to God, then what does Jesus show us that helps us on the way to God?

Jesus shows us a life in which everyone is equal and has a place. Compassion and generosity are core ingredients, but so also is needing each other. At the heart of life is communion – a deep joy that comes from connecting with one another. And all of these things bring us close to God. So if I'm blind Bartimaeus, begging by the side of the road, what I'm asking for is to be shown something of that life, so that I can be drawn in again, and follow on 'the Way' to God. Maybe I've lost my way, or I can't see my way anymore. Where then, might that happen for me? It's most likely to occur in ordinary circumstances, for that's where Jesus is to be found - in our humanity.

Once I was part of a group of people who met with some Muslims to learn about their experience of life in Australia. Their experience had a fair bit in common with refugees and migrants who had come to Australia in the past, except they had to deal with some people's prejudice around issues of terrorism and conversion. I was surprised to find that none of them went to the Mosque, nor had they when they lived in Iran – similar to the average Australian Anglican who doesn't actually go to church, yet professes to be Christian. To them, being Muslim was really about loving your neighbour, much in the same way as being Christian is, for Australian Anglicans. One of the women said she rejected what she thought were some restrictive views about women in Islam, but also that those views were really cultural. It was explained to us that there was a great variety of beliefs and practices within Islam, just as there is within Christianity, so if you ask a question to a group of Muslims, you might get a range of answers (as with different types of Christians), but the average Muslim punter is really just concerned with love of neighbour. It turns out too, that there is more to Iran than town squares full of wild people, chanting and firing guns in the air. Somehow our media have got it wrong. There are rainforests, great beaches and in winter, snow. One of the Muslim women expressed her sorrow at the lack of a decent roller-coaster in Adelaide, which most cities of Iran have. Interestingly also, is the fact that there are many refugees in Iran from Afghanistan. Sadly, Iran is ruled by a dictator, who, although forcing everyone to adopt his style of Islam, doesn't seem to know much about love of neighbour, and that's why these people have ended up in Australia.

A lot of what I heard at this meeting I could get from a book, but there were also things which can never be contained in a book, especially a sense of communion from sharing with one another. By meeting as we did, we were not just dealing with issues, practices and beliefs, but human beings. Whenever I do that, I find myself being drawn into something more. When I see how much people who are so different to me have in common with me, I realise there is something greater behind it all, - that behind my desire for a better world is a bigger movement for a better world, that my love for others is part of a greater love for others. And there I am close to God.

It reminds me of a clergy conference many years ago, in which we stopped talking about riveting subjects like parish management and how to get people into the church, and spent some time discussing our family relationships. I've never experienced such a lively discussion at a clergy conference. It just shows how we come alive when we engage with what is most human. Although perhaps not aware of it at the time, it seems we are being shown there is something greater there. And we are being drawn to it, because it feeds our soul, nourishes our humanity.