

Sunday 25 October 2015

Reading: Mark 10:46-52

Over the past few weeks Mark has been showing us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It is about following Jesus 'on the way'.

Four times in this central section of his gospel, Mark has said that Jesus is on the way with his disciples on the way from his ministry in Galilee, on the way to Jerusalem.

It is when they are on the way that Jesus asks "Who do people say that I am?"¹ It is while they are on the way that the disciples argue about who is the greatest.² It is as Jesus is on the way that the rich man runs up to him – but because of his riches he turns away and does not follow Jesus.³ And it is as they are on the way, going up to Jerusalem, that Jesus speaks for the third time of what will happen to him.⁴

But this way that Jesus is traveling is not the way the disciples were expecting. This is not the way of a royal progress, or an imperial triumphal procession. Three times he has spoken to them of what is going to happen – the Son of man must suffer and be rejected and be put to death – and will rise again.⁵ But the disciples have not been able to take in what Jesus has told them.

Do you know that feeling, when you hear something that turns your thinking upside down, that goes against everything you have understood of the way things are, that challenges the things you have always taken for granted. The reaction is often that you deny it – you can't take it in – you just want to ignore it.

It was like that for the disciples. The first time Jesus spoke of these things, Peter rebuked Jesus, denying that what Jesus said could be true.⁶ The second time, the disciples were afraid even to ask what he meant: they couldn't begin to understand what this could look like.⁷ And the third time James and John simply ignored what Jesus had said, and went right on with their request for the places of honour in the coming kingdom.⁸ Even as they walked with Jesus on the way, they could not see what was going on.

It isn't only this strange teaching of a kingdom gained through suffering and death that the disciples cannot understand. Twice Jesus has told them that in the kingdom the regular order of power and authority and status in the world will be turned on its head – the first will be last and the last first. The greatest in the kingdom will be the servant of all.⁹ Like a child.

And when a rich man came asking what he must do to inherit the kingdom, Jesus' loving response was to challenge him to give up his privileged position, all that gave him status and power, and to follow Jesus on this very different, upside down topsy-turvy way.¹⁰

No wonder the disciples were confused, and astonished – if even someone with all these worldly advantages was not able to enter the kingdom, what hope was there for anyone else? Who can be saved?

Ah, said Jesus, that's impossible if you're relying on human effort and achievement – but with God all things are possible.¹¹

And now they have reached Jericho, where the road turns up into the hills, up to Jerusalem. Jesus knows and has warned his disciples what it means for him to take this way to Jerusalem – suffering and death and rising again.

¹ Mark 8:27

² Mark 9:34-35

³ Mark 10:17

⁴ Mark 10:32

⁵ Mark 8:31;9:30; 10:33-34

⁶ Mark 8:32

⁷ Mark 9:32

⁸ Mark 10:35-37

⁹ Mark 9:35-36; 10:43-45

¹⁰ Mark 10:21

¹¹ Mark 10:26-27

The disciples, those who have been with him on the way, have failed to hear, to understand, to respond appropriately. Will there be anyone who is able to see who Jesus is, who is willing to follow him on the way of discipleship?

One person who is not going anywhere is Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. He is not on the way, but rather sitting beside the way, on the roadside, hoping for generous almsgiving from the pilgrims going up for Passover. He isn't on the way – he is an outsider, sidelined, a nobody, dependent on the charity of others. But this blind man sees things that those who have been 'on the way' with Jesus have not been able to grasp – when he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing, he knows who this is and shouts out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Son of David is a royal title, a Messianic title. Where others see Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher and healer, Bartimaeus recognizes one sent from God as king and Messiah. And Bartimaeus is not going to keep quiet about it.

This is the first time Jesus has been addressed in this way. It points us, the reader, forward to the next time Jesus is named "king of the Jews" as he is being questioned by Pilate¹², as he suffers just as he said. And when he is killed the inscription above his head reads "King of the Jews".¹³ Strange king, this, just as Jesus has been saying.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd wants to keep things quiet, to keep this nobody in his place. They want him to be mute as well as blind, as they try to shut him up.

(What happened the last time someone shouted outside Jericho? The walls fell down!)

But Bartimaeus is loudly vocal and persistent, "Son of David, have mercy on me" until Jesus hears him and calls him.

Bartimaeus' response is immediate. He throws off his cloak, springs up and goes to him. Bartimaeus' cloak was very likely the one thing of any value that he possessed. It was his source of protection and shelter, from dust and wind and rain and cold. And it was his source of income, spread out in front of him as he sat begging beside the road, like a busker's open guitar case. But when he responds to Jesus' call, he doesn't take it with him. He throws it off and springs up.

Remember the rich man who went away sorrowing because he had many possessions? He was unable to abandon all that he had, all that he had accumulated, all that he possessed. Bartimaeus responds so very differently, throwing off the security and protection he had relied on as he comes to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" This is the same question that Jesus had asked of James and John last week. Their response showed how blind they were when it came to understanding the nature of the kingdom. Their response had been to ask to sit in the places of honour at Jesus' right hand and left.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus simply says, "Let me see again." Think about what these words mean for Bartimaeus. He is saying to Jesus, "I want you to change my identity." Bartimaeus is blind, and he's a beggar. That's what he is and how he makes a living. When he begins to see he loses his identity as a blind man and his security of income as a person others feel obligated to help. He's stepping into the unknown: a world he can't begin to imagine.

No wonder Jesus responds "Go; your faith has made you well. In fact "your faith has saved you". Remember the disciples' question after the rich man turned away: "Who then can be saved?" Same word here. The rich man turned away from the salvation, the wholeness, the "being made well" that Jesus offered him because he could not let go of the riches he relied on. But Bartimaeus' faith was demonstrated in the way he responded to Jesus' call, throwing aside his cloak and coming to him, That has brought him healing and wholeness and salvation. And Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way

¹² Mark 15:2

¹³ Mark 15:26

We do not hear of Bartimaeus again, but given that in the next verse¹⁴ we find Jesus entering into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we must imagine Bartimaeus has fallen into step behind Jesus, walking with him toward the humiliation and suffering of the cross. He has followed without question, never asking where they are going or what will happen when they get there. In gratitude for mercy received, he simply follows Jesus.

For Mark, this is the essence of discipleship: to follow Jesus along the way, wherever that way may lead. And if Jesus is who Mark says he is, we must believe that following Jesus would lead us toward the most vulnerable in society, toward those who have been left on the streets to beg, toward those who have been shouted down by the crowds, toward those who have been treated mercilessly.

The world needs a church that sees clearly, like Bartimaeus, and not a half-sighted church that seeks its own glory. It needs not a church that seeks to restore its place of honour in society, but a church willing to risk itself on behalf of those who suffer, to give up its life so that others may live.

¹⁴ Mark 11:1