

When It All Becomes Clear

A sermon on Mark 10:46-52 by Nathan Nettleton, 27 October 2024

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Message

The capacity to understand and follow the way of Jesus is a miraculous gift.

Sermon

The story of Bartimaeus that we heard in tonight's gospel reading brings us to the end of a journey through Mark's gospel. It is not the end of the gospel, of course, but it is the end of a major section. What happens after this is that Jesus enters Jerusalem, and within a week the people there kill him, but we heard those parts of the story earlier in the year, during Lent and Holy Week.

There are three more readings from Mark's gospel to come before we change to Luke's gospel at the beginning of Advent, but tonight's was the final episode of a tightly knit section of the gospel in which Mark seeks to open our eyes to what following Jesus is all about. The story of Bartimaeus summarises and wraps up this whole section, giving us, in Bartimaeus himself, the ideal model of the follower of Jesus.

This may come as a surprise to you. At first glance, there doesn't seem to be that much in it. It's just another story of Jesus healing someone, isn't it? But no, it's not. The trouble is that there are at least two things that tend to blind us to what is really going on in it.

The first is that many of us have been brought up to think of these stories as nothing more than historical accounts of amazing things Jesus did, and that therefore the only theological significance they have is to prove that Jesus could do these miraculous things and so he must be God or at least an agent of God. The other thing, which massively compounds the problem, is that we usually hear these individual stories in isolation, and so the links from one to another don't grab us like they might if we regularly sat down and read extended sections.

So, to bring this story fully to life tonight, I'm going to have to do some recapping, and I hope that with this finale story the pieces really fall into place for you and illuminate what it means for you to be a follower of Jesus here and now.

This central section of Mark's gospel, which has run for two and a half chapters, sets out a vision of what it means to follow Jesus and juxtaposes that vision against constant illustration of how difficult it is for anyone to really grasp that vision. The previous section closed with Jesus looking at his disciples in some exasperation and saying, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (Mark 8:17-18)

And then this whole section is like a reflection on those words, "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?" And this reflection is framed by two stories of Jesus healing blind people. There are then several series of frames within frames, but tonight we've reached the outermost one again, so I'm just going to focus on it. But because they work as a frame, I do need to look at both of them. They are different, and the differences are very illuminating.

It may surprise you, and perhaps help convince you of their important relationship, that these two stories are actually the only two instances of Jesus healing blind people in Mark's account of the gospel. They are the only two, they come right after Jesus says "Do you have eyes, and fail to see?", and they enclose a series of accounts of the disciples failing to see what Jesus is trying to get them to see. And so the first one really rams home the point by showing Jesus having to have more than one go to get the blind person to see properly.

There is a conventional structure to the miracle stories in the gospels, and when the gospel writers are using the stories to make important theological points, the point is most apparent in the features of the story that break with the conventional pattern – the twist in the story, if you like. So in the first story, the twist is the need for a second attempt. Even for Jesus, opening the eyes of those who have eyes but fail to see is a difficult and challenging business that is often unsuccessful and even when successful, is often only so after repeated attempts. The intervening stories keep illustrating that as Jesus keeps trying to get his disciples to see and understand.

I'm not going to recap those intervening stories except in pointing out the way that tonight's final summarising story alludes to them as it wraps up their themes. Tonight we hear that when Bartimaeus was crying out and trying to get Jesus's attention, "many sternly ordered him to be quiet." Ring any bells? In recent weeks we've had the disciples sternly silencing an exorcist who wasn't part of their group, and trying to stop children from getting too close to Jesus. I'll say something more about that in a few minutes.

Tonight we hear that when Jesus calls for Bartimaeus, Bartimaeus throws away his cloak and springs up and comes to Jesus. The cloak is not only probably one of his only possessions, it is what he spreads out in front of him for people to throw coins into as he begs at the roadside. So he has thrown away everything to follow Jesus, and didn't we just recently hear Jesus say to another man, a man with far far more possessions, "give away everything you own and come and follow me."

That rich young man couldn't bring himself to do it, but Bartimaeus is deliberately contrasted with him as the model disciple. Remember I said a few minutes ago that the most important points are often in the twist, in the way the story breaks with the conventional pattern of a miracle story. The break in this story is even bigger than in the first one because in most respects this one actually has more of the features of a conventional discipleship call story, and this cloak is the first pointer.

When Jesus comes along, Bartimaeus is sitting at the roadside, his usual workplace as a beggar, with his cloak spread out like an office desk in front of him, collecting money from the passers-by. Sound at all familiar? Peter, James and John were going about their business too, as fishermen, when Jesus came along and called them to leave everything. But even more similar is Levi the tax collector, sitting at his desk in his tax-booth collecting money before Jesus calls him and he too leaves everything and follows.

And just to reinforce his point that this is more call story than miracle story, Mark uses the word "call" not just once, but three times. Jesus said, "*Call* him here." And they *called* the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is *calling* you." He is calling you, calling you, calling you.

Then, when Bartimaeus responds to the call and comes to Jesus, what does Jesus say to him? He says to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Do you remember that question? Just last week when James and John said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” Jesus asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” So Mark is setting up another contrast. What did James and John want? Status, privilege, the places of honour at Jesus’ right and left hand in glory. Do they still not perceive or understand? Do they have eyes, and yet still fail to see?

But who does perceive and understand? The blind man! “What do you want me to do for you?” “My teacher, let me see again.” Not places of glory. He just wants to see. And notice Mark again reinforcing the connection between seeing and understanding. Bartimaeus doesn’t say, “Healer, let me see” or “Miracle Man, let me see” or “Ophthalmologist, let me see.” He says “Teacher, let me see.” It is what Jesus is teaching that we are in danger of remaining blind to. It is what Jesus is teaching that he, and his gospel writer, are trying to open our eyes to.

Much of what it is that Bartimaeus sees is already implicit in those various contrasts. He sees that Jesus is one who will not tolerate anyone being silenced and prevented from meeting and following him. He sees that seeing and understanding is of far more value than places of honour and privilege. He sees that when Jesus calls, there is no point in clinging to your possessions or the pastimes or practices of your past life. You can freely give up everything and joyously follow.

And to further reinforce just how much Bartimaeus sees and understands, look at who he says Jesus is. Remember that one of the first stories in this section had Jesus asking the disciples “Who do you say I am?”, and Peter is able to give a good answer but immediately demonstrates that he doesn’t see what that answer means. So who does Bartimaeus say that Jesus is? I’m not making this connection up. Bartimaeus uses more names and titles for Jesus here than are found in any other story in the gospel.

“Who do you say that I am?” You are Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, Teacher, the Merciful One, not to mention by implication the healer, the sight-giver, the illuminator, the liberator, and the leader who I will follow on the way, the way that from this point on leads directly to suffering and death on the cross before going on further still to the promised land of resurrection life.

Now, there are two easy mistakes to fall into in response to this whole section that is framed and summed up in tonight’s reading. Yes, Mark has continually portrayed the disciples as having eyes but unable to see, as constantly missing the point of everything Jesus is trying to teach them. So the first wrong response we could make is to ridicule the disciples and feel terribly superior because we get it so much more than they did, and we’d never be likely to fall in to rivalries, or status seeking, or silencing outsiders, or discounting children, or letting addictions to money and possessions weigh down our following of Jesus.

Okay, maybe we’re not that deluded, but the second wrong response is probably much more likely, and that is to correctly identify ourselves with the fumbling errors of the first disciples and to beat ourselves up for our stupidity and failures and become despairing and despondent. “We’ll never be good enough. The harder we try the more mired in failure we become.”

You know why this whole section is framed by two miracle stories? It is not just that opening our eyes is the point. It is also that opening our eyes takes a miracle, a miracle that only Jesus can do, and even then a miracle that is so difficult that he might have to try repeatedly before we really begin to see properly.

Neither of these blind men got to see by trying harder. And grasping the astonishing truth of the grace of God made known in Jesus is not something any of us is going to get by screwing up our brows and thinking really hard about it either. Coming to see who Jesus is and what his life means about who God is and what all that means for who we are and how we are called to live is nothing but a miracle, a divine gift, an astonishing work of God in Christ.

And even when Jesus approaches and we want to reach out and receive the gift that he offers, there are forces arrayed against us, aren't there? When Bartimaeus called out to Jesus for help, the people around him sternly ordered him to be quiet. And you too will frequently come up against the unconscious conspiracy to silence your cries for help, for mercy, for the grace to see what is really going on and be free.

Because there are a lot of people who can't bear to see another suggest that this is not all there is and that there might be something more if we just reach out for help. Many of you know the patronising pity or the sneering condescension or the intellectual ridicule that are often used to silence us lest we admit that all is not well with the delusional reality soap opera that masquerades as the best life has to offer.

Don't worry if you don't fully get it yet, if you can't wrap your mind around what it is that Jesus is on about. Don't worry, but don't give up either. Don't let the cynics and nay sayers and illusion dealers silence you and embarrass you out of calling out to Jesus for help. Jesus is coming and he will not turn anyone away or prevent anyone from coming.

In fact, the minute he hears your voice he will be calling for you. If you will have the humility and courage to ask for it and receive it as a gift, you will see, because Jesus will open your eyes. And when he opens your eyes, you will see that nothing else is worth a fig, and you will follow him freely and joyously on the way.

This sermon draws heavily on the insights of Athol Gill in his book [Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle](#).