

Sermon Mark 10: 46-end 28 May 26

“What do you want me to do for you?”

I went to a school that was built on what was left of a benedictine Priory consecrated to St Martin and so we celebrated the feast of St Martin. What I particularly remember about St Martin is the story about how he cut his cloak in two with a sword, nothing like a bit of swashbuckling, giving one half to a beggar and keeping the other.

In our gospel reading Bartimaeus throws away his cloak which reminded me of St Martin although he cut his in two, and also the fact that there are a number of cloaks mentioned in the Bible. Jesus' cloak plays a crucial role in the healing of the woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages (5:27-30). Elsewhere in Mark's gospel it states that 'wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.' (6:56). When Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowd lay down their cloaks as a sign of welcome (11:8) and the dividing of Jesus' cloak during his crucifixion by the soldiers is another part of the torture and humiliation he was been subjected to (15:24). The cloak can play a different function, it can be a source of power, a divestment of power, a symbol of humiliation or of reverence; but in all these examples there is something about the cloak being a sign of status of some kind sometimes being lost or gained.

Bartimaeus discarding his cloak is a casting aside of the small amount of power that he does have; for Bartimaeus it would probably have represented his role as a beggar. He might have used his cloak to keep him warm or to sleep on, but outside Jericho where it is hot, nearly as hot as it has been here this week, his cloak would have mostly been used to collect money as a beggar, putting it in front of him as he sat on the side of the road. His throwing away of his cloak was a symbol of discarding his old life which he was no longer tied to.

This was in stark contrast to the description of the wealthy man that takes place earlier in the same chapter of Mark's gospel, in which the wealthy man was downhearted when Jesus told him he needed to take all his belongings and give them to the poor.

Bartimaeus is poor, sitting by the side of the road as Jesus and a large crowd were leaving Jericho. He is not just poor, he is the poorest of the poor. He lives on the edge of society, outside the city, outside of the path, excluded because of his situation.

Imagine the scene, the crowd flocking around Jesus, eager to hear what he is saying when this man, this beggar, cries out, causing a bit of a stir. He recognises who Jesus is, even though he was not able to see. He must have been able to sense the excitement and the tension too as he shouts out for help from this healer that he must have heard other people talk about.

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus? "What do you want me to do for you?" What do you want me to do for you....? What kind of response is that? Surely the answer is, and excuse the pun,

blindingly obvious? But perhaps it wasn't, because with the gift of sight Bartimaeus' life would be turned upside down. No longer would he be the man at the side of the road, defined by his lack of vision, no longer begging for enough to get by, no longer shouting out at passers-by for their attention; instead, he would have to find work...life would never be the same again. Bartimaeus rises to the challenge, replying "I want to see" and just imagine what it must have been like not to see and then the first person you set eyes on is Jesus...wow!

Bartimaeus is unlike Jesus' own disciples who at his point in the narrative still didn't really understand who Jesus truly was. James and John have just asked whether they could sit one on each side of Jesus in glory, much to the disgust of the other disciples. They wanted power, authority and prestige. Bartimaeus is altogether different; he is already a man of faith, courage and even discipleship. He recognises Jesus as the Son of David, he believes that Jesus can help him which Jesus does telling him, 'your faith has made you well', and having thrown off that cloak and regained his physical sight, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way.

So in this story there is a physical healing and a spiritual healing too. No longer a beggar but a follower of Christ, one who I would like to imagine would spend the rest of his days telling others about the day he encountered Jesus the Messiah on the road out of Jericho. Retelling the story again and again.... "do you know what he asked me? What did I want..... well I told him and that amazing day I was made well."

I wonder how we would reply if Jesus asked us what did we want him to do for us? Being made well might not mean a physical healing for us, it might be an emotional or spiritual healing of something that ails us, something that weighs us down, something that stops us recognising Jesus for who he really is, and we all have those things in our lives

And when we have told Jesus our heart's desire, with faith and courage, are we ready to throw down our cloak and follow Him on the way?