

Readings

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Mark 10:46-52

Sermon

This morning we conclude our reading from Job as he admits to God that he is just human and therefore does not know everything.

Perhaps those who circulate weird conspiracy theories could make a similar confession. Although the prose ending of the book of Job is also somewhat weird.

Fortunes are not only restored but increased and I can't imagine having more children would completely console Job for the children he has lost.

However, you will have noticed that I easily get fascinated by the messages hidden in scripture which stretch the imagination beyond the mere reading of the words.

Therefore. I need to mention part of the story the lectionary skipped over. In Job's conversation with God, he is instructed to pray for the friends who gave him all the bad advice. It seems that they misrepresented God so much that only the righteous Job can pray for their forgiveness.

It says a lot for Job's righteousness that he does pray for them. The episode therefore challenges us to be equally gracious to those who wrongly accuse and irritate us.

In *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* Maurice Andrew suggests, that in these closing scenes of the Job saga, we notice the difference between Job and his friends.

The friends give instructions, but Job lives in the problem.¹

That may well be a message for us as we wrestle with our world of Covid 19 and the tension between people's health and the health of the economy.

This week I heard the Director General of Health being interviewed on the radio and the person doing the interview was insisting that Dr Bloomfield give him a program with targets and dates so businesspeople would know when they can get back to work.

I could almost hear him quoting Amos 8,

When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain and the sabbath, so we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.' (Amos 8:5)

However, the Director of Health, lives within the problem and knows full well that neither people nor viruses are predictable, and plans have to be frustratingly flexible.

Ever since Covid 19 found its way into our world there has certainly been plenty of people to give instructions and demand the right' to buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.' (Amos 8:6)

The real continuing challenge however is to live in the problem and find a way though that will leave a trail for others to follow.

¹ Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999), pp.321-322

Bartimaeus lived in his problem, he couldn't see.

Lack of vision severely limited his ability to earn a living in any way but begging, relying on the compassion of others. I am sure there were plenty of people ready to give him instructions.

Raewyn and I recently paused on our walk to compliment a couple of men on the way they had restored a two-story earthquake damaged home. The house had been an 'as is where is rental' ever since the original owners had been shaken out by the earthquakes.

The men checked that we didn't have an electric car and then told us how unjust the extra tax on utes was. They then moved on to beneficiaries who can't be bothered working and just lie on their bed all day living on the benefit.

So, I imagine there would have been people only too ready to similarly berate Bartimaeus for his laziness. Move him on if they felt he interfered with trade, or gave the neighbourhood a bad name. There would also be the religious righteous who, like the friends of Job, and our ute driving neighbours, would see Bartimaeus bringing his problems on himself.

The logic would be that Bartimaeus must have sinned otherwise he would not be suffering.

Just like the way some people in our world blame the unemployed for not finding a job.

Alternatively, my mother encouraged me to believe that all children deserved an equal start in life. So in many ways she was good socialist. But her socialist ideology would not allow her to give to a cause she thought should be funded by the state. She suffered from cancer for years, but I can't imagine her donating on daffodil day.

I remembered that recently when I realised that in this world of email and texts the letters that get delivered to us come from Presbyterian Support, the Methodist Mission, The Fred Hollows Foundation, Plunket, the SPCA and numerous others.

The pandemic is pointing out even clearer than the begging letters that, rather than follow my mother's faith in a caring society, we have run down our health system and relied more and more on NGOs to do the state's work. Therefore, people must fill the gap with health insurance.

The problem I found with health insurance was that as I got older, less able to work, and more likely to need medical care, our friendly insurance company increased the premiums. I even got a phone call to encourage me to cancel my policy.

Fortunately, the stubbornness I inherited from my mother encouraged me to hang on to a thin shred of cover. Therefore, I was able to have eye surgery last year, which was more costly and probably more complicated than Bartimaeus healing.

Jesus did seem attentive to Bartimaeus while healing him but my surgeon chatted about his upcoming mountain bike trip with the nurse. He then began criticising the preaching of the chaplain at his son's school. At that point I joined the conversation by wondering what people said about my preaching behind my back.

If you read through Mark's Gospel you will see that Jesus endured a fair bit of criticism and misunderstanding of his preaching before his meeting Bartimaeus.

In fact, Mark uses this story of Blind Bartimaeus to highlight Jesus' approach to people. Central to Jesus' teaching was his way of living in the problems of ordinary people.

But, as we examine the symbolism, we must also remember that it is extremely likely Jesus did perform healings within the healing methods of his time. It would otherwise be too difficult to explain the strength of the healing tradition in the gospels. Certainly, these healings could well be exaggerated because people who retell events are prone to overstate the details that impress them. Like the background chatter during my surgery.

More importantly we need to focus on the way Mark has used Bartimaeus' instantly restored sight as a metaphorical contrast to the continued blindness, or lack of vision, of both Jesus' opponents and his disciples.

As chapter ten in Mark's Gospel progresses the disciples seem to have more and more trouble understanding Jesus.

The chapter began with the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus in a conflict between diverse rulings of unjust Jewish laws and the slightly more just, but of course un-Jewish, Roman laws. The disciples then needed a private explanation after the exchange. Then the disciples chase away the children, but Jesus calls them back and uses them as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God.

Next a rich young man is turned away and the disciples need that explained.

Then it becomes obvious that they are going to Jerusalem and those who follow Jesus become afraid. But rather than allay their fear Jesus explains that he will be killed.

The next misunderstanding is when the disciples, who obviously have not been listening, hearing or seeing, ask for top jobs in the 'Kingdom of God'.

Mark has constructed the question, if the disciples who have been with Jesus can't see what is happening? Can anybody see?

The answer to that question is so blatantly obvious that even a blind man can see.

As Bill Loader points out in his online commentary it is a nobody in the world's eyes, a sidelined person, a blind beggar, who becomes the hero of faith.

This, writes Loader, is typically Mark at his subversive best.

Mark can do this because he knew stories about Jesus. He was able to order those stories in ways that answered the questions he posed and highlight the points he wanted to make.

Jesus did not sideline people. Jesus responded to what were seen as the 'hopeless cases' of his day. This story illustrates an approach to people which is central to Jesus' teaching.

It is the approach of 'living in the problem' rather than just giving instructions. Jesus' answer to the problems of his time and place was that the people who lived the problem were the ones who could answer the problem.

Jesus' disciples were not drawn from the ruling elite.

In fact, the wealth of the rich man kept him from being part of the solution even though he had kept all the commandments from his youth.

However, the disciples were so tangled in tradition and proper process that they lacked vision! But a few words from Jesus and Bartimaeus was not only able to see but followed Jesus 'on the way.'

That phrase 'On the Way' is the phrase the church has neglected to notice for most of its two thousand years of history.

Parts of the church have focussed on the miraculous healing and, just like the friends of Job, have made sick people feel guilty because they have not been miraculously healed.

Others of course have been inspired by the story to seek medical and optical cures for impaired sight. Some like Fred Hollows and the foundation he founded, have sought to live in, or close to the problem, bringing sight to the poor of our world.

Much of the church however has been as metaphorically blind as the disciples and sought power and status from the church. Church courts and church leaders have given instructions on righteous living rather than truly living in the day-to-day problems of people's lives. The church has sought disciples among the nice people rather than follow Jesus' example of seeking disciples who lived in the problems and allow them to be part of the transformation.

A meeting with Jesus transformed the life of Bartimaeus. Mark highlights his transformation by choosing a character who was a blind beggar. However, Bartimaeus didn't just make a trip to Specksavers. Bartimaeus had an encounter with Jesus and, where others had failed, Bartimaeus was able to see that transformation involved following Jesus 'on the way'.

Following Jesus and being a disciple of Jesus is not a matter of following proscribed rules, creeds or even forms of worship.

The life of Albert Schweitzer highlights living in the problem and so finding Jesus and following him on the way.

At the end of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer wrote

He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who did not know who he was. He says the same words, 'Follow me!', and sets us to those tasks which he must fulfil in our time. He commands. And to those who hearken to him, whether wise or unwise, he will reveal himself in the peace, the labours, the conflicts and the suffering that they may experience in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery they will learn who he is.²

After writing that book Schweitzer left his comfortable life as a German theologian and lived within the problem of disease and suffering in darkest Africa.

Schweitzer could not find the historical Jesus through academic research but the shadow of the Jesus he found in the ancient texts, the stories and narrative of the gospel writers opened his eyes, and like Bartimaeus, he followed Jesus on the way.

Whether we are wise or unwise may our reading, our worship and our prayers give us the vision that allows us to follow 'the way of Christ' in our time and place.

² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Bowden, John (ed.) (London: SCM Press 2000), p.487.