

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Bartimaeus and Discipleship (Mark 10.46 - end).

### **The Setting.**

This story pictures Jesus about to set off on his final journey towards Jerusalem and a very uncertain future. It is a gift from the compilers of the Lectionary to us here in the Welland-Fosse benefice today for reasons which will become clear. Your parish priest is also about to set off on a journey with a very uncertain future. However, the story is unique because the focus is not on Jesus but almost exclusively on the blind man Bartimaeus who persists in his wish to become a disciple.

Biblical scholars suggest that Mark pushes this story – it is almost a repeat of a similar healing in chapter 8 – because of the disciple's lack of understanding. We know that the gospel writers – and Mark in particular – portray the disciples as blind for they can't see what Jesus is up to. It is only the mad, the bad and the dangerous to know who understand Jesus and his secret ways. Now, in this story, the blind Bartimaeus lets everyone into the secret: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, v 48.

So this story is about Bartimaeus, not Jesus, and this sermon is about our Benefice and not some gush about the parish priest heading for retirement.

### **The Message.**

Bartimaeus sits by the roadside, v 46. He cannot move because of his blindness. But he has heard of Jesus and knows that Jesus could offer him a way forward so he cries out with some passion. But this is an embarrassment to the disciples who tell him to be silent, v.48. The beggar is the wrong type of person to join the church. But Bartimaeus persists. He won't be shut out by Jesus' followers. V.48 tells us he cries out even more!

Now Jesus may be focussed on this final journey to Jerusalem and an uncertain welcome but he stops and invites the blind man to talk. How do you imagine the disciples would re-act? Would they be pleased – and if so, why did they not initiate the call – or would they be tetchy and frustrated? Jealous even? It was Jesus who calls; the disciples obstruct him. Of course, it may not be the disciples who rebuke him, v. 48. The "*many*" could be onlookers who might think that a beggar was not a fit person to join Jesus.

In spite of the obstacles, Bartimaeus cries out all the more, v48. He is passionate in wanting to join Jesus. And why? Because he knows himself and he knows his weakness. If his blindness could be cured, he would be a different person, a whole man. At last, the two meet and the beggar is healed. Jesus tells him to go about his business but that was not enough for Bartimaeus. He follows Jesus, v. 52, – not a vague promise for the future or a skulking away because his need was met but he followed "*immediately*": one of St. Mark's favourite words.

The beggar calls Jesus, 'Son of David' which suggests the all-conquering Messiah. That is not the style of Jesus but Bartimaeus will learn that in his company. A distorted image of the saviour is no barrier to the community of faith.

## **The Lessons.**

This story is about Bartimaeus, not Jesus – about our benefice, not about the parish priest. So, what does it say about us? There are 5 points which are worth pondering.

**Firstly**, Bartimaeus heard the commotion on the road as Jesus passed. There's nothing like some excitement to attract attention. We do some of that: good social events, child-focussed activity, rounders - but these are rare. We need more jazz across the Benefice!

**Secondly**, the disciples discouraged Bartimaeus. This is very serious. We are very good at making people feel welcome when they arrive at the church door but do we go out and invite them in? You will expect the church to grow but we all have a part to play in that.

**Thirdly**, Bartimaeus knows his weakness. We all come to faith from a variety of reasons which must be honoured and supported which means more than a cursory acquaintanceship. Would this suggest home groups? Furthermore, he was blind but could now see. Do we really see the value of supporting one another in their churches?

**Fourthly**, the beggar got up and followed immediately. We are all followers, disciples, pilgrims on the road but do we need encouragement to make our discipleship more of a priority? What kind of support is necessary?

**Finally**, Bartimaeus had an odd idea about Jesus but that did not stop him being an ardent follower. We learn more about the truths of our faith from one another.

Our church activities have taken a severe knocking during the pandemic. It has not been easy to keep up that communication but Zoom is worth re-considering if we're to have another lockdown. I can personally testify to the excellent quality of friendship from the group of folk who gather on Zoom every other weekday for Morning Prayer.

I don't know how long this interregnum might be but I think it is likely to be at least six months. Six months during which I shall be watching and listening from afar but you are more than capable of increasing the quality of your discipleship yourselves, following the example of Bartimaeus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.