

25th October, 2009
10am at St Johns in the City

The reading from Mark this morning is one of transformation.

Both personally and hopefully communally as well.

In Marks Gospel Jesus is leaving the city of Jericho and encounters the blind beggar Bartemais by the side of the road.

And when I say encounter, it must be stressed this almost didn't happen. The crowd was not at all keen for Bartemais to be acknowledged.

Lets recap the story.

We have Bartimeaus along the way side, sitting on the side of the road begging as usual.

The passage says he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was approaching and he began to cry out.

It is the very name of Jesus that he responds to,

Imagine being blind and hearing about this man Jesus of Nazareth who was a healer and had strange new teachings that claimed to hold the key to eternal life.

Jesus' teaching and miracles were already the talk of the town around Jericho and thus there were already certain expectations or understandings associated with Jesus.

So Bartimeaus in faith knows who Jesus is and cries out to him, Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me!

He has faith that Jesus can provide mercy for him and so acts on that faith by crying out.

Imagine being blind and only hearing via gossip and chatter that this Jesus character is approaching.

Then imagine having the courage to shout out "Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me!"

Add to that the fact that socially you are the lowest of the low, blind and reduced to begging for a living.

Now imagine being told to shush, imagine after making that huge leap of faith to be told to cease and desist by the people around you.

In verse 48 it says the crowd rebuked him and told him to be silent.

The Crowd that follows this life giving Jesus, is telling this blind beggar to be quiet, that his calls for Jesus' mercy are irrelevant and annoying.

And yet the encounter happens because Bartimeaus will not be silenced by the crowd.

His faith moves him to continue to shout.

And Jesus hears his cry.

It is intriguing the shouting going on in Jericho

In the OT book of Joshua the actions around Jericho involved shouting as well.

The result then was the fall of the walls of the City

In our reading from Mark, shouting also leads to walls falling down, but not physical ones.

This time it is social barriers that are cast down and a restoration of a right relationship that is enabled.

Maybe Mark is showing us a reversal of the mayhem that originally occurred in Jericho, instead of battle and death this time there is healing and restoration.

Because when Bartimaeus shouts Jesus hears.

What happens next is a critical action that speaks volumes.

Jesus stops.

Jesus with a crowd of followers leaving the city of Jericho on his way to Jerusalem to take up his Cross,

Stops.

stops for a blind beggar called Bartimaeus

By stopping Jesus makes the statement that Bartimaeus counts.

The crowd were so caught up in following Jesus, they were perhaps already looking forward to Jerusalem or eagerly waiting for the next teaching to come from Jesus' lips.

They were so caught up that they did not know how to stop.

They are caught off guard, the same person they had thought stood in the way of them connecting with Jesus was now the centre of his attention.

Jesus instructs the crowd to call Bartimaeus over.

The same crowd that was wanting to shoo this lowly blind beggar out of the way as someone unimportant must now call him into Jesus' presence.

Still the Crowd seem to think this is a chance occurrence, that Jesus is conducting some random act of kindness to a boisterous beggar.

Verse 49 reads that the crowd said be of good cheer or take heart he is calling you.

It still sounds like the crowd have not understood the true reason that Jesus has stopped.

It is ironic and perhaps exactly what Jesus wanted to highlight that a blind beggar can truly see who Jesus is

and yet the crowd who are supposed to be followers of Jesus are blind to see the importance of the poor and hurt and marginalised.

Then Jesus addresses Bartimaeus directly "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus responds "My teacher, let me see again"

Jesus says "go your faith has made you well"

Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way.

The immensity of Bartimaeus' leap of faith is a resounding testimony to the life giving nature of Christ.

It is made real in Bartimaeus' life in two overt ways, the first in the healing of his blindness and second in his abdication of his old life in favour of a new life following Christ.

Christ's words of Life are so powerful they transform and empower people to disregard the very culture that surrounds them

In Bartimaeus we can see how God's love can enter any human situation and can bring healing and restoration.

Bartimaeus was sitting **by the way** before his encounter with Christ, after hearing the words of life he is transformed and restored to new life and is now **following on the way**.

That way is the way to Jerusalem, the way to the cross.

the cross that shows us how Christ's sacrifice brings life for all.

There are two major points I would like to draw out of this reading this morning.

The first is the importance of Jesus stopping and the second is the transformative nature of Christ.

The fact that Jesus actually stopped for this poor, lowly beggar and then healed him speaks to the value Christ specifically placed on those who are suffering and marginalised.

Jesus's action is in stark contrast to the crowd who seem to be wanting to keep following Jesus to Jerusalem.

There is a kind of crowd mentality to make sure Jesus has no unwanted distractions around him.

But Jesus physically stopped for what the crowd saw as a distraction.

He stopped and gave his full attention to Bartimaeus.

How do we personally and as a community of faith respond to this.

It is easy to see ourselves as the crowd in this story.

How often do we have preconceived ideas of where Christ is going?

How difficult do we find it to stop as Jesus did and meet people where they are?

Especially when people do not fit the mould of what we would like.

How many people do we label as a distraction instead of a brother or sister in Christ.

To then broaden the focus, as a Church, how do we simply stop and meet people where they are.

How amid our well thought out and helpful structures and processes do we discern when Jesus has stopped.

When and how do we know that Jesus has stopped and changed direction.

We always grapple with the pitfall of becoming a legalistic institution that continues comfortably to exist within beautiful buildings

but has missed the point of sharing Christ's words of life with the marginalised.

That is why the phrase Reformed and reforming is so helpful for us as a Church.

It highlights the constant need for us to seek Christ's direction, whether it be walking purposefully toward Jerusalem and the Cross or stopping and ministering by the roadside to those in need.

We are called by Christ through prayer and discernment to answer the cries of those who are by the wayside and call out for Jesus' mercy.

This call will require us to stop and meet people on the side of the road not just those who are already a part of the crowd.

In our own context how do we stop and reach out to those by the wayside?

As we follow the way of Christ here at St John's are we aware of any areas that we are *in the way* instead of *on the way*?

If we are serious about serving the needs of others ahead of our own

Then it will mean taking time out from our journey to stop and respond to what others need.

And it will mean managing change

The whole concept of reformed and reforming means we must be a people that are willing to embrace positive change.

Our Church history proudly points to people such as Martin Luther and Martin Luther King who instigated great change in the Church.

People who in their own cultural context were labelled distractions or trouble makers.

And yet their cries have been heard and transformation has occurred.

As The Rapper Snoop Dog says in one of his songs

"Change is gonna come nephew, you better believe that"

and while I think Snoop Dogg and the presbyterian Church may come from different angles

The premise is the same, we are called to embrace and believe in the transformative nature of Christ

As a youth worker I often wonder how far that transformative change is embodied by the church

whether Churches meet young people where they are at.

Or whether Churches expect them to be a separate group on their own until they are grown up enough to quietly take their place in the pews.

I would suggest the latter is the more prevailing strategy.

A strategy that I suggest is not working because the Church as a whole is not stopping and valuing young people in the way Jesus did to Bartimaeus.

That is why I am encouraged by our community here at St John's.

Encouraged to see the partnership with the BGI and the commitment to minister and journey with young people effectively.

By wrestling and trying to find the best way to be Church together as an integrated community both young and old we are stopping like Jesus did.

In that time of stillness hopefully we the crowd are transformed from any preconceived ideas of where the Church is headed

And instead are focused solely on where Christ leads us.

Focused on the transformative and healing nature of Christ.

It is the transformation and healing of Bartimaeus that recalls us to our own baptism.

A time when our voice shouted above the crowd “Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me!”

A time when we heard those words of life from Christ. “Go, your faith has made you well.”

A time when Jesus stopped for us.

Our faith in Christ is what led to our transformation and our subsequent following of Christ on the way.

How do we bring that transformative good news to others?

If we can understand the life changing effect of these moments when Jesus stopped and met people where they were

it should give us pause to seek those moments in our own lives, both personally and as a community of faith.

Jesus challenges us to stop and address the unconventional and to help the marginalised

to meet people where they are and maybe that means not letting the crowd mentality rule all the time.

Maybe that means change in how we journey in faith with each other.

Maybe it means re-assessing what the forms of our worship look like.

For St Johns who are the blind people by the wayside?

And what are we doing as the crowd that is potentially holding those people back?

These are all questions we should feel comfortable asking ourselves and questions we should feel comfortable wrestling with.

They are questions of life not questions of dis-unity, if we are happy with the status quo then we are content with reformed and have given up on the reforming

Our mission statement that names us as a restless community discontent with the status quo - points to us as not being content with cruising along

but instead eager to grapple with questions of life.

In conclusion we can identify ourselves in the story from two distinct angles

Firstly as the crowd, preoccupied, caught up and blind to the need of the marginalised.

Sorely in need of the wake up call to journey with all people,

Secondly we can identify with Bartimaeus and the words of life from Christ that cause us to cast off our cloak and follow him,

words that transform and heal us, that open our eyes from our old life into the new.

And in revisiting the significance of our baptism may we be spurred to stop when Christ does and share that transformative good news with others, wherever and whoever they may be.

Praise be to God.
Amen