

Seeing is Believing

Last Sunday after Trinity 08.00 & 10.30 24th Oct 2021
Also Bible Sunday St James' Church, Alderholt
Reading: Mark 10:46-52

You may have noticed something different about me over the past few weeks! No – I haven't dyed my hair; this is its natural umm – silver colour! I'll give you a clue no glasses! I've recently had cataract ops on both eyes and, hopefully, will now only need glasses for reading. Having spoken with other cataract veterans, I knew what to expect after the ops, but I was absolutely amazed at the vividness of colours. I hadn't realised just how bad my cataracts were, but it brought home to me how much we take our vision for granted – until it deteriorates or we lose it.

This, of course, leads us into the Gospel reading for today, where we heard the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. We don't know what caused his blindness, but we are told that he previously had sight because, when Jesus asked him what he wanted, Bartimaeus replied that he wanted to be able to see – again.

Being blind and having to beg went hand in hand in the time of Jesus and for many centuries later. It was a curse to be blind and those afflicted had no choice but to beg. Even today in many parts of the world, blind people are considered to be 'unproductive' and 'not employable', so they have to beg to provide their basic daily needs.

Blindness must have been particularly tough for Bartimaeus, because he knew what it was like to be able to see and he may have dreamed of one day having his vision restored. But he would have known that it was a false dream because medical services were very limited and only available to the most-wealthy people. There was of course, nothing remotely like our amazing NHS. So, when Bartimaeus heard that Jesus the preacher and healer was in town, he was determined to make the most of the opportunity. What he would not have known is that it was the only opportunity he would have to receive this help because Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to face his mock trial and crucifixion.

Today, we still say 'seeing is believing', and it was through the public performance of miracles that most people came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah – but this was probably the last time that Jesus would perform any miracle in public.

It might be helpful here to image ourselves back in the time of Bartimaeus, witnessing what took place. *Pause...*

We are in the crowd on that hot dusty road to Jerusalem and are quite close to Jesus, so we can see and hear all the action. Jesus has just turned to the disciples and is explaining something to them. It seems that, although they've been travelling around with him for three years, they still haven't got the message of his ministry - so he's spelling it out for them.

He's telling them that everything written by the prophets about the 'Son of Man' will be accomplished when they arrive in Jerusalem. He will be handed over to the

Gentiles to be insulted, flogged and killed – then, on the third day he will rise again? The disciples clearly can't understand what he's saying, particularly about him rising from death after three days.

As we head down the dusty road we can see a beggar sitting by the roadside with his cloak over his head to protect him from the dust. He's having some problem contending with the noise from the crowd too; but he knows he must be patient as they may help fill his begging bowl!

Although Bartimaeus is blind, his hearing is very acute and he's asking what all the excitement is about. Someone in the crowd is telling him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

"I've heard stories about this man," says Bartimaeus. "He heals people – he performs miracles. If I can only talk to him, I'm sure he can give me back my sight." The man is shouting out now, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Some of the crowd – not us of course – are telling him to stop shouting and be quiet; but this is only making him shout even louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus has heard him above the commotion. He's turned and is speaking to the beggar. The beggar has jumped up and thrown off his cloak. He's hugging and kissing everyone – and he really can see again. But – Jesus hasn't done anything yet – except speak to him. The crowd are shouting and cheering too, "Wow, we've seen this miracle with our own eyes; how can we not believe that this man really is the Messiah, the Christ."

We would love to stick around a little longer and see what happens next, but we should return to the 21st century and church in Alderholt.

It is so much easier to believe when something happens before our eyes – but what about Bartimaeus? In his blindness, he seems to have had a deeper vision that enabled him to see a spiritual truth that was beyond the comprehension of the disciples.

As he sat by the roadside each day, he would have heard the tales about the man who preached about the kingdom of God, where all are equal, the rich and poor, healthy and sick, able-bodied and disabled. He knew the scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would be descended from the line of David; so, when he called out to Jesus he didn't say "Jesus, I want you to cure me of my blindness". He shouted "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me".

It was that plea that caused Jesus to turn and speak to Bartimaeus. Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted but he still asked the question, "What do you want me to do for you"? And when Bartimaeus replied, "My Teacher, let me see again" he revealed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, who could grant his plea. With a few words, Bartimaeus was healed of his physical blindness and was moved into immediate action. He jumped up, threw away the cloak that gave him daily protection from the harsh environment, and stepped forward in faith, to receive whatever lay ahead as he joined Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

The disciples, however, were still blind to the true identity of Jesus. Their vision was clouded by the dream that Jesus was the mighty leader who would rise up and defeat the Roman occupation army and restore their nation to its former glory. But, to be fair to the disciples, Jesus had told them that they were unable to comprehend all that he was saying to them – because it wasn't their time for understanding. That would come later, after his resurrection, when he would be with his Father but would send the Holy Spirit to teach them and explain everything.

I wonder, how many of us are like the disciples – spiritually blind? When you read your Bible, or hear it being read in church, do you take what you hear at face value, relying on everything being spelt out in the sermon, where you are a captive audience listening to the interpretation of the preacher – but unable to respond?

Well, actually you can respond. If you look beyond the words of the sermon – you may be surprised at how often you can arrive at an alternative or deeper meaning. This is one of the benefits of joining a home group where you can discuss the Bible in greater depth. And I would welcome your comments or discussion on any sermon that I preach – so long as you don't expect me to have all the answers.

Bible Sunday, reminds us that the Bible is the number one reference for all Christians, but it's not the only source of guidance. Today, life for many people is a treadmill of urgency, particularly within employment and raising a family – there's little time to stop and reflect. But as you go about your daily life, do you look for those deeper messages that are contained in everyday events and situations? It's so easy to miss these messages that can guide and direct our lives. We encounter God every day, through the people we meet and the events we are engaged in – if we only have eyes to see, and of course – ears to hear?

In closing, I ask you please to join with me in singing song number 409 in our hymn book 'Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus' – and we'll sing it through twice.

Open our eyes, Lord,
We want to see Jesus,
To reach out and touch him
And say that we love him;
Open our ears, Lord,
And help us to listen;
O, open our eyes, Lord,
We want to see Jesus.

In the name of God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.