

SERMON FOR 28 OCTOBER 2012 AT CATHEDRAL

The Gospel story we have before us today highlights a disabled person with an obvious need: a blind beggar, asking for money as they did and still do. He'd heard that Jesus was coming... By the roadside, on the outskirts of Jericho, amongst a large crowd, he begins to make a great commotion, shouting out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me".

Previously in the gospel Jesus has silenced messianic acclamations of this kind, but he does not do so here - maybe because the moment of his Passion, which will define his messiahship is now close at hand. In fact, the acclamation of blind Bartimaeus paves the way for the Davidic and messianic overtones of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the very next scene. Many sternly order Bartimaeus to be quiet, but he cries out even more loudly. What is he expecting? That Jesus would tell his money-man to go over and give him something, some small change? For Jesus, with pressures of every sort, crowds all around, and knowing what is waiting for him when they leave Jericho and climb the long hill to Jerusalem - how easy it would have been for him to deal quickly with this man, and pass on to so-called 'more important' things. But there are no unimportant people in the kingdom of God.

The desire and longing of the man in today's Gospel story was reflected in what I saw recently amongst a group of disabled people. About two months ago, I was in Brisbane for four days participating in a Retreat conducted by L'Arche Australia. A bit of background for you. L'Arche is the French word for the Ark. It is an international fellowship of communities in over 40 countries that was founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier.

These communities consist of those with an intellectual disability (“Core members”) and those without such a disability, usually living together but not always. L’Arche has a spirituality that is rooted in Jesus and his values, thanks to the vision of its legendary and charismatic founder, but L’Arche opens its arms to all, whatever their faith. L’Arche’s purpose is to bring healing and wholeness into people’s lives by bringing them, both disabled and those who are not, together in communities of mutual respect and understanding in a place where they will feel secure - be ‘at home’, if you like. Those who exercise leadership in L’Arche must think of themselves as servants and slaves of all: that is, as people whose powers and capacities are not exercised for their own benefit, but solely for the benefit of building up others. It is the model Jesus gave us - see Mark 10, verses 43-44.

In Newcastle, L’Arche has about 25 members. We don’t live together under one roof, but we meet regularly for meals, social activities, worship and spiritual growth. We are an incorporated association with a constitution and a Board, of which I am a member.

There were 40 people at this Retreat, from up and down eastern Australia. Each core member had a companion to assist them. Eight of us went from Newcastle - four core members and four companions. I was the companion for Fred, whom I have got to know quite well over the last five years. Whenever I ring him up or see him, he says, “Hullo, churchman”. Although in his 50s he had never been on a plane before. “Freddy’s a bit scared”, he said several times, but he was also very excited.

I found the spirituality of the Retreat very moving - there was such an atmosphere of fun, of acceptance, of welcome and hospitality, and above all LOVE. When wild laughter and

shouting occurred, when someone leaped around and called out in the midst of proceedings, no-one tried to suppress it, no one was anxious or upset. The Retreat just flowed on.

Defenceless, disadvantaged people were experiencing something very rich. We all were.....

The L'Arche Retreat participants share, it seems to me, something of the experience of the blind man in today's Gospel story. They and Bartimaeus want recognition - but not status or privilege - they just simply long to be set free from their marginalized state and included in what the rest of us take for granted. They have an "inconsolable longing" for God to lead them home, to that place where they will feel secure in their "true country" - to use the words of the Prayer of the Day in your reading sheet. But do we not all share an "inconsolable longing", a phrase made famous by C S Lewis who said, deep inside, we all long for this place we have never been - heaven. This is what Lewis wrote about it:

"There have been times," he says, "when I think we do not desire heaven, but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else. . . . It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds when the mind no longer knows wife or friend or work."

Was it the acute sense of his own longing, and his own need that drove blind Bartimaeus to break through the barrier created by the crowd to get access to Jesus when told Jesus had called him? Anyway, throwing off his cloak and springing up, he comes to him. The cloak was the man's security. Shade in summer, warmth in winter, it functioned like a small tent, in which the few possessions the man had could be kept as safely as a blind man could expect. So it was surprising that he would cast aside his cloak and then go to Jesus. That he did so with such vigor suggests he was ready to abandon his only possession: like the first four disciples

in the first chapter of Mark, he leaves all he has - to follow Jesus. It may also be the outward manifestation of the faith behind his cries.

Psalm 34.....reflects Bartimaeus' longing and that of the L'Arche members:

Look towards him and be bright with joy: your faces shall not be ashamed.

For I sought the Lord's help, and he answered: and he freed me from all my fears.

.....and,

Here is a wretch who cried and the Lord heard me: and saved me from all my troubles.

Some, or all of us will be able to identify with the Psalm's words, too.

The story of Job we've been following these past few Sundays is also about a man in a cloak, though not a material one. Job's 'cloak' was his righteous indignation at having to suffer and, with that, came his demand for an explanation from the Almighty himself. Job didn't get the answer he wanted but, when he had shed his "cloak of indignation", he was humbled by the Lord, the upholder of the universe, coming to him personally and offering him the intimacy of communion. Job becomes a figure of blessing - one who despite, or because of his suffering is able to pray, at the Lord's behest, for the three who had tormented him....see verses 7 to 9 that are omitted.

I acknowledge the point Brendan Byrne, the noted Australian biblical scholar, makes in his theological reading of Mark's Gospel about Jesus' question to Bartimaeus , "What do you want me to do for you?" It may seem redundant - the man's need is obvious. But the question is exactly the same one Jesus put to James and John in the preceding scene (verse 36).

They wanted for themselves places at his right and left in his glory, showing thereby their continuing spiritual "blindness". Bartimaeus' request to "see again" highlights what they so badly needed but failed in their ignorance to ask for: the capacity to "see" and really

understand”.

And as to the healing itself: there is no gesture or word of healing recorded. Jesus just tells the man to go on his way because his faith has made him well. He has received his physical sight but, at a deeper level, he has experienced salvation, for the phrase translated as “made well” in our text derives from the verb “to save” in the Greek - a word that is about being rescued, and set free. So Bartimaeus does not go away, but follows Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, ready to witness all that will take place there. The blind beggar becomes, then, a model of discipleship and faith.

In conclusion, some questions to consider:

- What functions for us as the cloak functioned for Bartimaeus?
- Do we have the self-knowledge to see what the “cloak” is in which we sit, huddled but relatively secure?
- Are we ready to cast aside our cloak - our self-protective strategies - and ready to ask Jesus for what we really need?