

PENT 21B SERMON ST AIDAN'S AND WESLEY 10.30

We have just heard two great affirmations of faith in God. Blind Bartimaeus called out “Jesus, Son of David” and in that way he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Job said to God “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees you”. He finally truly understood how to relate to God. He knew God in a depth he had never done before. Before these affirmations, both men had suffered a lot.

When we look at the position of the story of Blind Bartimaeus in the gospel of Mark, we see that it is the final episode before the entry into Jerusalem. It is the culmination of all the teaching and healing that Jesus had done. Throughout Jesus’ ministry after leaving the area of Galilee in the north of the country, Jesus’ disciples failed to understand much of Jesus’ teaching.

That journey had begun with the healing of an unnamed blind man and culminated with the healing of Bartimaeus. These two healings of blind men only serve to emphasise the metaphorical blindness of the disciples to what Jesus was teaching. Three times, Jesus told of the future for himself and each time the disciples misunderstood.

Just to take the stories of chapter 10, we have the teaching about divorce and the lesson that all must become like little children. Children were not to be kept away from Jesus. The disciples had not understood the importance to God of children – little ones of no account in the adult world.

Then there was the story of the rich young man who had tried to keep all the religious laws but was not prepared to give up his possessions to follow Jesus. Once more, the disciples needed to have that lesson spelt out in simple terms by Jesus.

Even so, James and John asked to be allowed to sit on Jesus’ right and left hand when Jesus came into his glory! They still didn’t understand. Jesus had to talk to all the disciples and explain that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

And then, the little troop of Jesus and disciples came to Jericho. Jericho is possibly the oldest inhabited town in the world and certainly the lowest, being 250 m below sea level in the Jordan valley. From there, a road heads up more than a thousand metres to Jerusalem. In that ancient town of Jericho, there was a blind beggar called Bartimaeus. When he called out to Jesus, the disciples were annoyed. What was this down and out riff-raff doing insisting on gaining Jesus’ attention? Yet Jesus stopped and called for him to be sent to him.

Now something happened when Bartimaeus answered that request of Jesus that we could easily miss. Bartimaeus threw off his cloak and left it. His one cloak. It would have been needed for cold nights but even more especially it was what marked out his begging area. Like a musician busking on a street corner with the violin case on the ground for coins, so the cloak would be put

on the ground for coins to be thrown on it. The cloak defined him and was his meal ticket. That was faith speaking out loud – to throw away what he needed for begging even before he regained his sight. Jesus said that it was that faith which healed him. And Bartimaeus followed Jesus.

Indeed, Bartimaeus must have remained with the disciples from then on. His name and that of his father are remembered and referred to as though of one that the readers would be familiar with. The prefix, 'bar' means 'son' in Aramaic but Mark has spelt it out again in Greek – 'son of Timaeus' for his Greek speaking readers.

It has the impact of someone at Mirinjani village talking about Gregor Henderson and saying to the others "you know Gregor, he's the son of Jim Henderson" and everyone would say "O, yes, we know who you mean – they're both good Christians". The people back then immediately understood that this was the Bartimaeus whom they knew and so knew that this was an important story of a faithful person answering the call to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus' had his life completely changed by his faith in Jesus and in God.

Job, too, had his life changed when he truly understood and had faith in God. Earlier, Job had suffered much – his children had all been killed, his livestock dead, his body covered in sores. He had reached the depths and yet had never lost touch with God. He continued to pray even if those prayers were ones of argument with God. But he thought of God in the terms that many in those days did. People thought that God was punishing him for something and yet Job maintained that he'd done nothing to warrant what had happened. Finally, he came to understand that God was a god of love. Within God's love, life can take on a new force and enjoyment. For Job, that meant a new family, becoming a pastoralist once more. Life was good.

Sometimes we can wonder about the ending of the book of Job. Why did God give Job so much wealth at the end? Does having faith mean that we can expect prosperity just as in some of the prosperity preaching of some churches? I don't think that that is what we are meant to learn from the book. Think of some of the stories you have heard about how people have fallen into the depths of despair and then found a faith in Jesus and God which has totally turned their lives around. Wealth is not normally the result but having a life worth living is always the result.

There is one such story in the latest edition of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress magazine, Message Stick. The story tells of a man who had been an enthusiastic teenager, raising money for the Royal Flying Doctor Service and going to University. But the death of a brother and then of his fiancée made him seek comfort in drugs and alcohol. He ended in prison.

And then he found Christ. He started studying again. Now he's a leader in his community working to transform others. He has the support of other Christians and even the suicide of another brother has not destroyed him. This is how faith can turn our lives around – just like the way faith turned Job's

life around. This man now has a job, an income, and is respected in his community.

Non-Christians might say that he has done well for himself but we can recognise that it is God working in and through him that has made the difference. It is not prosperity for the sake of the consumables of the secular world. It is sober living and working for others and above all, God, that has made the difference.

The theologian, Gustavo, Gutierrez, has written about Job and says that justice works within God's love. God's love is freely bestowed just as the apostle Paul said hundreds of years after Job. And Gutierrez reminds us that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 about how faith, hope and love abide in God and the greatest is love. When Job came to this understanding, he could really say "my heart is bursting within my breast" as he had earlier in hope. Because of this, Gutierrez says, we must seek God's love, not justice or retribution when things go wrong for us. Gutierrez goes on to say: "God's love, like all true love, operates in a world not of cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness". As a result, Job realised that he could not see himself as a special case but that there were many people in dire circumstances. Nor could Job view history with a penal understanding - that is that things happened as a result of people's bad or good deeds. Rather, God's grace enfold and permeates all who are willing to allow God in.

It is by coming to that understanding of God, that we can see Blind Bartimaeus as one of God's beloved.

We need to understand that God is greater than anything we can see or understand. God, by definition, is greater than anything we can imagine. If we try to pin God down, then we limit God to a human scale.

Accept that God is love, that within that love our lives can be changed just as they were for Job and Blind Bartimaeus. Our changed lives will include working for justice, caring for the marginalised, comforting the suffering and sharing God's love with others.
Amen.

Now let us join in singing hymn 143 and bring those words as a prayer of heartfelt praise to God.