

The story of blind Bartimaeus which we have just heard is one of those relatively well-known stories in the gospels which from the outside seem like simply one of those stories that reaffirms Jesus' care for people, whoever they are. But delving into it deeper, brings up all sorts of messages that are really helpful to us in our Christian journeys and particularly when those journeys are just starting as Harley's is this morning with his baptism – his entry into Christ's church. So, let's explore.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for two reasons – first the festival of the Passover is approaching and so this group are going to Jerusalem to celebrate that festival, and second, because Jesus knows his time has come. Do you remember the story right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when the wine ran out at the wedding at Cana in Galilee and when Jesus' mother asked him to help, Jesus responded – my time has not yet come? Well now it has and he knew that his time on earth would end at Jerusalem.

But this group of people is not just Jesus and his disciples – the closer the group gets to Jerusalem the larger it becomes as people want to hear Jesus teach as he walks. Jericho, where this action is taking place, is about 15 miles from Jerusalem. A couple of interesting facts about Jericho – first, it is generally believed that the two places on earth which have been inhabited for the longest time are Damascus and Jericho, and second, Jericho is the lowest inhabited place on earth – it is on the coast of the Dead Sea which is around 250 m below sea level. So the journey to Jerusalem was described as being up to Jerusalem for very good reasons.

It was the law that every male Jew over 12 years of age who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem must attend the Passover festival there, but it was clearly impossible that such a law should be fulfilled and that everyone should go. Those who are unable to go were in the habit of lining the streets of towns and villages through which groups of Passover pilgrims must pass to bid them Godspeed on their way, so the streets of Jericho are lined with people. But, there are even more there than usual, for there are many eager and curious to catch a glimpse of this audacious young Galilean who has pitted himself against the assembled might of the Jewish church.

At the northern gate, the gate leading to the road to Jerusalem, sits a beggar, Bartimaeus by name. Picture the scene. Bartimaeus would have been sitting on the ground, his cloak – probably his only possession – the thing that brought him warmth at night, and somewhere for people to place their offerings during the day, would have been laid out in front of him. His blindness means he cannot see what is going on, but he hears the tramp of feet. He asks what is happening and who is passing. He is told that it is Jesus.

He has heard of Jesus, the miracles that he has performed, and he is not going to miss his opportunity, and he starts to create an almighty noise. "Jesus, Son of David have mercy upon me." Clearly Bartimaeus has more than heard of Jesus: to call him Son of David is saying that he knew who Jesus was; that Jesus was the promised Messiah because that is the implication of that description.

You can imagine the reaction of those around him desperately trying to hear the teaching of Jesus – they were being stopped by a beggar, one of the lowest of the low in Jericho. But Bartimaeus will not be stopped, "Jesus, Son of David have mercy upon me." – and Jesus hears him. and he is brought to Jesus.

Just imagine what that must have been like. Yes, many of us have cried out to God when we needed help. Many of us have gone through difficult times in our lives when we didn't know what to do and almost as an act of desperation have called out to God – If you are there help me. But here, Jesus is calling back to Bartimaeus. "Tell him to come here." How many of us have had a response like that?

And then Jesus asks Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus, this great teacher, is asking a blind beggar what he wants – is it not obvious? Why does he have to ask? In last week’s gospel reading Jesus used the same question to his disciples James and John when they said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” and so Jesus’ question to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” is a very reasonable question – even though the answer they gave caused a huge row amongst the disciples. But surely, this time the question is unnecessary – and, surprise surprise, Bartimaeus replies, “My Rabbi, I want to see!” Was that exchange really necessary? Hold that question in your thoughts – we will return to it.

The story concludes with the response that is rather more typical of Jesus, “Go, your faith has healed you.” Typical, yes – but actually it is the conclusion of what was the last miracle that Jesus performed in Mark’s account, and so it leads us on to what we can learn from stories like this.

First, there is the sheer persistence of Bartimaeus. He was not going to be silenced. He knew that this was almost certainly his one and only chance of escaping from the life he was living – and so he was going for it.

Second, we have to ask why Mark included this particular story in his gospel at all. Jesus had healed many many people, and so what made this incident special? To me, it is the contrast between Jesus’ disciples asking that question, and a poor, desperate, lowly beggar asking the same question – and the answers that were wanted. “What do you want me to do for you?” The disciples wanted status, importance, being higher up the ladder than their fellow disciples. Bartimaeus simply wanted that one thing that he has lacked, certainly for years, possibly all of his life – to be able to see. Surely, if the disciples hadn’t felt awkward about their squabble before this incident, they would certainly feel put in their place by this beggar.

Third, Bartimaeus’s response was immediate and eager. When Jesus called Bartimaeus to him we are told that, “throwing off his cloak, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.” Was that just for convenience’s sake that he threw off his cloak? This was much more symbolic than that.

By throwing off his cloak, that cloak which was his only possession and which he used for begging, he was responding to Jesus by casting off his old life as he prepared to enter a new life as a follower of Jesus. Nothing half hearted – this was a complete transformation.

But how do we know that is what happened, because we hear no more of Bartimaeus in the bible. Well, the key point is this. This is the only miracle in the synoptic gospels (Matthew Mark and Luke) where the person who is healed is named. Even in the telling of this story by Matthew and Luke, Bartimaeus is simply a blind beggar. From that we conclude that Bartimaeus is known to Mark; having been healed, and followed Jesus on the way, this complete commitment by Bartimaeus to follow Jesus has resulted in him becoming a member of Mark’s church – wherever that ended up being.

Three of the many lessons we can learn from this story. And the three that relate particularly to a baptism. We talked during the baptism about two key things. We talked about faith in God and how we relate to that, and we talked about turning to God. Bartimaeus had faith.

He was at the beginning of his journey with God as he made the decision to follow Jesus. There was lots he didn’t yet understand, but that didn’t matter to him, because he had faith. In Harley’s case, perhaps

in a year or two, any understanding he has of God will be limited to a baby called Jesus at Christmas, but his journey has begun. And Abbie and Andrew, and you wonderful godparents, have made promises today to help him on his journey of discovery, and I thank you for doing that.

And then we talked about turning to God. And here, I return to that question that Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus knew precisely what he wanted: his sight. Too often our admiration of Jesus is a vague attraction. When we go to the doctor we want him to deal with some definite situation. When we go to the dentist we do not ask him to extract or fill any tooth but the one that's diseased. It should be so with us and Jesus, and that involves the one thing that so few people wish to face, and that is self-examination. When we go to Jesus if we know what we want, then we should tell him. He will already know – the important thing is that we have discovered that as well. Like Bartimaeus, this exchange is really necessary.

Jesus is there for each and every one of us. He wants to know what each and every one of you want from him. No, rather like Bartimaeus, we can't see him. No we are very unlikely to hear the sort of call that he made to Bartimaeus. But in the same way that he changed Bartimaeus' life by giving him what he asked for, he can do the same for us. Reach out to Jesus. Tell him what you need. Be prepared to be surprised by what happens next.

My prayer today, for Harley and for all of you, is that you will find your paths to God become clearer as you devote time to finding out what God wants of you. Amen.