

27 October 2018

Eyes Open (Mark 10: 46-52)

Pentecost XXIII

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As some of you know, Robert and I recently sold our house in Turner and are looking for somewhere else to live. We have a few months, but have found ourselves quite occupied by this process, pouring over properties online and visiting them on site, trying to discern among our many options which would be best for us. I am learning to attend to new things all the time, beyond how a property first appears. For example, is this house oriented in the right direction – are its living areas facing north? Is the configuration right for our present, and possible future, needs? Are its foundations solid – which was not necessarily the case in a ‘character filled’ 1950s Ainslie house that I viewed recently. How might I renovate a particular house to improve its space, its flow and its energy rating?

At one stage we became interested in a knock-down rebuild proposition, where you can design the house that you want, get its orientation right, and have a high energy efficiency, starting from its foundations with an in-floor heating system in the cement slab. Such a sustainable house would not only make us warmer in winter for lower costs, but it would also make us better citizens of our country, and the world, if we were to use our household energy more efficiently.

It’s just that we haven’t quite found the right block in our preferred area that we can afford. So there have been a lot of things to discern, and a continual review of what houses are available and how we might respond to them.

At this point, you will be pleased to know that I am not actually here to talk about houses. I am here to talk about discernment. And although I have begun with an example in which I am involved, here is where I segue to an example in which we are all involved. For I began thinking, as I searched for a suitable house, how this discernment in my outer life relates to discernment in my inner life. By that I mean

my spiritual life – to become ever more open to God’s presence (which sounds remarkably like orienting a house to the light), and to fulfil my Christian calling to be transformed, reformed, or renewed (which sounds an awful lot like a renovation). After all, the self is a kind of house – a temple of the Holy Spirit, a place where God stands at the door and knocks, desiring to sup with us and we with God (Rev 3:20). God would like to make a home with us (John 14:23), so is our house in suitable shape?

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, also referred to the self as a house. He taught that becoming a self was an act of integrity, bringing into some sort of balance the incongruous mix that we are, belonging to both heaven and earth, the finite and the infinite. He saw this work as our privilege and our calling, and as eternity’s demand on us. He viewed as ridiculous those who failed or refused to respond to this calling. He thought that, if each self was a house, with several levels, these people preferred to live in the cellar. Kierkegaard was urging us to take on the work of integrity, that is, to live in our whole house.¹

So, if the self is a kind of house, what parallels might there be between my discernment of houses, and our discernment of our spiritual life. As I sat with this question I realised there were quite a few resonances. I will offer you four. They are to do with: orientation, renovation, foundations, and energy efficiency.

As the orientation of a house became more important to me, I found myself wondering, am I oriented in the right direction? Are my living areas facing the light of the world? The early church theologians worked with a similar metaphor in relation to us being made in the image of God. An image in a mirror, they pointed out, can only exist if it is facing its original. That is, we can only be who we are if we are oriented towards God, our creator and recreator. Similarly, if Christ is the light of the world, we need to be facing Christ to let that light in.

¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: The Sickness Unto Death*, translated with introductions and notes by W. Lowrie, New York, Doubleday, 1941, p. 176.

Then there is the question of renovation. As I considered what needed to be done to fix an existing house, I began to wonder what sort of renovation I might be needing to be transformed? Perhaps a few small changes, enlarging some windows to let in more light; or maybe a good sweep and a new coat of paint for all those dark and dusty corners I have neglected for a while? Or maybe I am ready for a major renovation, dismantling the walls of my defences and re-configuring the whole house? More radically still, maybe I am a knock-down/rebuild project, so as to start afresh on a new foundation.

In one sense, the Christian life is all about a new foundation. Rather than building up our identity based on social status, material possessions, family connections, and the privileges and honours (or otherwise) that go with them, the Christian is called into a new way of being. It is not just that this old foundation is one of sand – unsteady and unreliable – but it is also a way of forming one's identity over-against others, always comparing oneself to others, striving to be a somebody. To shift one's foundation onto God is a long-term process of renouncing all of that, and accepting the gift of oneself as the image of the original, content to be nobody special, just another, loved human being among others.

While a house needs to be knocked down for new foundations to be put in place, we can transition over time, but the process is no less radical. It is still a full reconstruction from the ground up, but if done well, will certainly improve the energy efficiency of the house.

How might we speak of energy efficiency in a person? Well, maybe like this: some people, or all of us at some stage, spend so much of their energy on anger and resentment, fear and anxiety, self-protection and hatred, that they have very little energy left to warm their house. By that I mean being a warm and welcoming presence, in whose company others find sanctuary – peace and security. But to get there, we need healing from past hurts and traumas, to forgive others and to undergo forgiveness ourselves. Such a transformation of our desires and responses will not only make us more comfortable with ourselves and more at peace, but we

will also be better citizens of this country and of the world. Our energies will be more aligned with God's energies and purposes.

So, there is a lot to discern in my search for a house, and in our spiritual lives as houses for ourselves, others and God to dwell in. Where might we find guidance in this discernment process?

Who better to turn to for helping us see more clearly than a blind man? We are not told much about blind Bartimaeus in the reading for tonight. We do not know how long he had been blind, how he became blind, what his life circumstances were, or how he knew about Jesus. It is as if to enquire about these matters is to ask the wrong questions. Mark, in writing his gospel, has cut out those extraneous details so that we can focus on the main point – this man was blind, and in his desire to see, he turned to Jesus and was healed. In his blindness, he oriented himself to Christ and let the light in. And Mark wants us to be guided by Bartimaeus to do the same thing.

Some commentators of this passage point out that this is not an isolated healing of a blind man story. There may well have been such a healing historically. However, the gospel writers, constructing their 'good news' after the death and resurrection of Christ, use such stories also as metaphors to proclaim Christ as the only way we can see the truth about ourselves and God.² In Mark 8:22-27, Jesus heals another blind man, where he led him by the hand out of the village, laid spit on his eyes, and restored his sight. In between that story and this one in Mark 10, Jesus tries to get his followers to see about his death and resurrection, but they are blind to it.³ The blind are healed, but the disciples fight among themselves about who will be the greatest and miss the whole point of Jesus' humble reliance on his Father's love and grace as the foundation of his being. After his death and resurrection, it finally dawns on them how blind they were. They were caught in the same rivalries and exclusions that led to Jesus' death. Blind Bartimaeus could see better than they could.

² James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, pp. 119-125.

³ The Girardian Lectionary on Mark 10:46-52 was helpful on this point: <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/proper25b/>

As we come to discern our spiritual life – how to orient ourselves more fully to the light, engage in renovations, shift our foundations onto the grace of God, and improve our energy usage – perhaps we can allow blind Bartimaeus to be our guide. To seek healing and sight, the first step is to orient ourselves to Christ, hand ourselves over into his care and allow him to open our eyes.