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'Take Heart': The Mark of Adventure (Mark 10. 46-52)

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If you told a friend you were going off on adventure this weekend, it's unlikely the first thing they'd imagine is that you'd be going to church. Bushwalking, maybe, canyoning, white-water rafting, sky diving ... yes ... but church? It's hard to see this kind of expedition making the television ads for the latest four-wheel drive – crashing through the undergrowth, musical crescendo, swerving to miss wild beasts as we make our way to ... the car park at Holy Covenant. 'To boldly go where no man has gone before' ... well it's not quite the image of a contemplative worship service.

And yet – it's what we claim. Adventure is one of the marks of our community, one of the values around which we shape our common life. Is this just a lame attempt to sound more trendy and exciting than we actually are? Well – I hope not – and tonight I want to suggest how.

As so often, the etymology of a word is a good place to start. The word 'adventure' comes from the Latin, 'advenire', to arrive. It's the same root as for 'Advent', the season before Christmas where we prepare for the arrival of the Christ-child. In our spiritual tradition, this notion of 'advent' names something fundamental about the human experience of God. And that is, that God is 'Other' to us – not necessarily who we expect, not bound by our systems of meaning and control. God comes towards us, God *arrives* and breaks in on our experience from (as it were) the outside, and from a different future.

This doesn't mean it's an alien 'outside' or a capricious future. Our Scriptural tradition insists on God's steadfastness and the reliability of God's promise to be towards us for blessing. Even so – the outworking of that promise, the ways in which it's realized, often appear to us surprising, unanticipated or even downright unwelcome. Very often, it requires some kind of break with the life we've known till

now, and the future we have planned. Which is why characterizing the life of faith as an adventure is not as incongruous as it might first seem.

So how do you live such an adventure? How do we dispose ourselves to respond to this advent of God?

Certain forms of tourism promote 'choosing' or 'planning' your adventure, but that's a slight oxymoron. It's true you can embark on particular activities or excursions that offer the likelihood of adventure. You can more intentionally put yourself in the way of it – like blind Bartimaeus does when he deliberately draws Jesus' attention to him. But even then, what happens next – in a real adventure – is never totally under your control. Adventure befalls us. It's always to some extent an undergoing, a being drawn beyond security and into unknown territory. Which means it requires of us and calls forth from us particular ways of being.

The first of these is courage. Here courage, from its root meaning 'coeur' or heart, means whole-heartedness. My favourite story of discovering courage on adventure is told by the educationalist and Quaker, Parker Palmer. He was on an Outward Bound course, terrified and inching his way down a 110 foot cliff by abseil. After a couple of false starts, he'd started to get the hang of it, albeit still moving very cautiously, when his instructor called up. "Parker, I think you'd better stop and see what's just below your feet". I lowered my eyes very slowly – so as not to shift my weight', writes Palmer, 'and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock'. To get down, he'd have to find a way to swing around the hole: 'I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death', he says, 'so I froze, paralyzed with fear'. After some time, the instructor called up again: "Parker, is anything wrong?" To this day', he writes, 'I do not know where my words came from ... In a high, squeaky voice, I said, "I don't want to talk about it"'. To which his instructor replied, 'it's time you learned the Outward Bound motto ... If you can't get out of it, get into it!'¹

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp.83-84.

Adventure requires that you give yourself to it totally. You can't abseil down a cliff or climb up Mount Everest, if you're trying to keep part of you ungiven, if you're half-hearted and clinging to the illusion you can keep yourself safe by not getting fully into it. And it's the same in the adventure of faith.

Bartimaeus committed himself totally to his encounter with Jesus. He could have avoided it – he could have lived quietly into his essentially predictable and diminished future – a future pretty much continuous with his past, sitting blind and begging by the roadside. But when he heard Jesus was walking by, he knew the possibility of something life-changing had arrived in his life. Advent, adventure was upon him and he was willing to be vulnerable to it. He shouted out to be heard and when the crowd 'sternly ordered him to be quiet', he 'cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus is struck – 'he stood still', the text says, and then tells the crowd to call Bartimaeus. 'They called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart" – and there's that courage again. These words may also be translated "Be of good courage; get up, he is calling you"'. And Bartimaeus throws himself without reserve into what might yet be possible: 'throwing off his cloak' – that is, laying down his old identity and taking off a layer of self-protection, 'he sprang up and came to Jesus'.

So responding to, participating in adventure calls for courage – whole-heartedness. And connected with that, the trust which is hope in action. I said earlier that the future from and to which we are called in the life of faith is not some arbitrary or capricious newness, mere thrill-seeking, but is grounded in the goodness and promise of the God who comes to us. The story of our tradition begins with this call to trust in God's promised future, when the Lord says to Abraham: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that *I will show you* [no map or blueprint here]. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing' (Gen.12. 1-2).

So Abraham goes, entrusting himself and all he has to this promise, to what theologian Devin Singh calls, 'an anticipatory freedom in living that is staked on

hope'.² This call to participate, hope-filled, in adventure – to risk an unknown future for the sake of God's promised blessing and life runs like a thread through the Scriptures. It's the whole dynamic of our participation in divine initiative – Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the prophets, Mary and Elizabeth, the disciples and everyone healed and commissioned by Jesus. It's utterly striking how often Jesus says either, 'Come follow me' – with no further information, or 'Go' – 'go, your faith has healed you', 'go, and sin no more', 'go out into all the world'. Adventure just is what happens when we deeply encounter God, when God encounters us.

And that's why adventure is one of the marks of Benedictus. We are a community committed to encountering God, committed to being open continuously to the future of God – calling us into our vocation, calling us to be for blessing in ways we do not yet know and cannot yet imagine. There's no template for us, no endpoint for our journey and we are travelling by faith and not by sight. And this calls forth from us particular ways of being. It calls forth courage, whole-heartedness as we seek to live as fully and generously as we can towards God. It calls forth hope, as we entrust ourselves to the promise of blessing, which is given that we in turn might bless those around us.

It's perhaps a quieter looking adventure than some – but make no mistake. When we turn into this carpark, when we enter this space of encounter with God, it's a wild ride that awaits us – it's the adventure of our lives!

² Devin Singh, 'Resurrection as surplus and possibility: Moltmann and Ricoeur', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (3), 251-269, p.258.