



23 October 2021

### **Largeness of Heart (Mark 10. 46-52)**

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In Mark's gospel, blind Bartimaeus is the first person openly to acclaim Jesus as 'son of David', and thus Messiah. And this encounter is the last thing that happens while Jesus and his disciples are still on the road to Jerusalem. It occurs, then, on the cusp of the so-called 'triumphal entry' into the city which leads within a week to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It's thus, as one commentator puts it, a 'narrative preparation' for the final revelation of Jesus' identity and meaning. It's also part of a familiar dynamic in this gospel which the minor characters perceive him more clearly than his closest disciples.

I find Bartimaeus a deeply likeable character. Like other marginal souls in this text – like the Syro-Phoenician woman and the woman with the haemorrhage – he's gutsy. Like them, he recognises that with Jesus passing by, the possibility of something life-changing is upon him and he is going to seize his chance. He shouts out to be heard and when many order him 'sternly ... to be quiet', he cries out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' He will not be silenced, made to give up on his hope of restoration. And Jesus hears him call: 'he stood still', the text says, and then told the crowd to call Bartimaeus to come to him. They called him, saying 'Take heart' or 'be of good courage; get up, he is calling you'.

Bartimaeus continues to respond boldly – even exuberantly. 'Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus'. Commentator Bonnie Thurston suggests that the cloak symbolises Bartimaeus' old life. His occupation has been as a beggar, and people would have put their offerings on his cloak. This gesture represents his leaving behind the life he'd known and what little security he'd been able to garner. And having committed himself thus, he receives his sight and begins to follow Jesus.

Our theme at Benedictus over the past couple of weeks has been 'God of Small Things'. As I said last week, the experience of lockdown got me wondering

about the spiritual significance in our tradition of constraint, smallness and hiddenness. We've touched on how Jesus' hidden life in Nazareth inspired Charles de Foucauld's vision of radical discipleship in the midst of ordinary life, and how Therese of Lisieux's 'little way' of love had an impact seemingly out of all proportion to the sphere in which she lived it out.

There's a sense in which Bartimaeus' trajectory seems unlike these others. Whereas de Foucauld and Therese of Lisieux moved **from** the world **into** monastic confinement, their vocation leading them deeper into anonymity and littleness, Bartimaeus seems to be heading in the other direction. He's moving from a diminished life of blindness and beggary, stuck at the roadside as others go by, into participation in the public events of his day. He exercises his voice, regains his sight, and joins Jesus 'on the way' – though admittedly it's a way that leads to the cross. He's getting bigger, his life and the scope of his activity enlarging from lockdown to beyond! So does he really fit in our series?

Well, the common thread in all these figures, I think, is to do with their generosity of commitment to the way of discipleship, wherever the way ends up leading, however it ends up being lived out. Much of Mark's gospel draws a contrast between those who are prepared to give themselves fully to Jesus, even at the risk of being rejected or looking foolish, as compared with those who withhold themselves or play it safe or set pre-conditions on their engagement. Among the withholders, we might think of the rich man who couldn't let go his wealth, James and John bargaining for positions of honour, the Pharisees constantly picking up on technicalities and asking for another sign, and the disciples blocking the little children from coming to Jesus. On the other hand, among the exuberantly self-giving, as well as Bartimaeus, we might think of the four men lowering their paralysed friend through the roof of a house (2. 2-5), the outcast woman tremblingly touching the hem of Jesus' garment, the Syro-Phoenician mother persisting in the face of his reluctance to give her what she wants, and the father of the boy convulsed by 'an unclean spirit'.

In each of these cases, it's the unashamed acknowledgement of need and the unquenchable desire for life that brings people undefendedly and whole-heartedly to Jesus. And it seems that this is what creates the possibility of their healing through their receptivity to his wholeness. Time and again, Jesus affirms this stance, this way of being – 'your faith has healed you', it's 'made you well'. And, whatever the external circumstances of our lives, the gospels testify that this whole-hearted way of being is what we're called to and is a choice we can make.

But what about when it's not? What about when we know ourselves to be, at some deep level, among the withholders? For some of us, 5s and 6s on the Enneagram, our personalities tend in this direction – withholding is our default setting for security; for any of us, experiences of rejection, trauma, illness and grief, or afflictions like anxiety, fearfulness and loss of confidence, can make it profoundly difficult to entrust ourselves wholly to anyone (let alone to the invisible, barely audible drawing of God). We may long for the exuberance of Bartimaeus, the daring really to let ourselves go and give ourselves to the adventure of faith, but again and again we find ourselves stuck, doubting, cautious, repressed. Some of us might still be trying to make up our minds to risk calling out as Jesus passed by, terrified of drawing attention to ourselves lest we be drawn into a life too big for us! So it's all very well to speak of the call to radical self-giving and discipleship, but what does this really mean? And how do we do it – especially if we're conscious of inward resistance, timidity or outright terror?

Well, even to ask the question, I think, to become aware of being withheld, is a key step. Just as it was for the father of the boy possessed in chapter 9 of Mark's gospel who, responding to Jesus' words that 'All things can be done for the one who believes', cried out immediately: 'I believe; help my unbelief' (9.24). Being present to our held back-ness, our resistance is a necessary beginning.

But what then? Well, if we're going to commit wholly to this way of discipleship, we first have to discern if what we're asked to trust is in fact trustworthy. We don't and we shouldn't just give ourselves to anyone. In my experience, there are often two parts to this discernment. The first is to recognise

where my current way of being is keeping me small, inhibited, less than free, less than whole-hearted. Once I've seen that, I know I'm coming to the end of something.

The second part is to become aware, to awaken to the invitation before us.

Sometimes this looks obvious, Jesus himself walking past on the road; at other times, it's much less so, more like an inkling, a yearning, a drawing towards that you can't fully explain but that doesn't go away. Like Moses present to the strangely flickering light in a desert bush, like waking in the night feeling called to pray, like an attraction to a community or a way of life or course of action. Is it for real? Can you trust it, or are you deluded? What would count as confirmation? And what will happen if you walk away, hold back, don't give yourself to the possibility?

For finally there comes a point where we have to choose. In the life of faith, we always have to risk ourselves in advance of a guaranteed outcome; we have to trust ourselves as well as God, daring to believe, in the words of Thomas Merton, that even if 'I have no idea where I am going' and 'do not see the road ahead', if I truly desire God, then God 'will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it'. This does not mean that all suffering comes to an end, or that there's always a happy ending – and maybe there are times when the intensity of suffering or of God's absence makes it almost impossible to hold onto any sense that it's meaningful to speak of handing yourself over to God. Yet, stubbornly, despite everything, it seems to me that faith must say that, as with Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, such self-giving, such trust, does affect how it's possible to bear things, and the love that may flow from our wounds.

We have been celebrating God present in the ordinary life of families, workplaces, communities, whose love may be incarnate with redeeming power even in the smallest of our actions, the most constrained of situations – the God of small things. But God is not small – and the energy of God's spirit welcomed within always expands us from the inside, moving outwards from the heart of being (as Rowan Williams puts it). There's a wideness in God's mercy, says the old hymn, and according to the psalmist, God brings the faithful into a broad and spacious place (cf. Ps. 66.12). There's nothing stingy about the love of God, nothing restricted or

restrictive. And that means when we dare to open ourselves to it and give ourselves towards it, then like Bartimaeus and the saints throughout the ages, we too will find our courage quickening, our compassion deepening and our hearts enlarged. We too will discover that our faith has made us well.