

# *From the Side of the Road to the Centre of God*

A Gospel reflection

Sunday, October 28, 2018

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We offer today in dialogue form a reflection on the story of restoration of sight to Bartimaeus told in the Gospel according to Mark (10:46-52). My associate will read from scripture; I shall offer some response:

**As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.**

And we also sit . . . Day after day, hour by hour, sometimes in total contentment, and at other times frustrated, tired, angry, alone. As we sit, we wait, patiently or in other ways for many different things—for opportunities, for companionship, for direction towards the next steps of our lives.

The one who sits refuses to travel or finds themselves unable to do so. To sit is to rest (though our bodies sometimes complain of sitting, especially on hard church pews for long periods of time). The one who sits has time to ponder in a way that is foreign to the busy traveller who must negotiate twists and turns through places familiar and strange, accompanied by people known and those still strangers to us. To sit is to relax, though often amidst uncertainty.

From the roadside, life seems to pass us by, inviting or drawing us into its current though sometimes reluctantly or because of our own inertia. Sometimes we enter the traffic easily and eagerly. When the time is right, we will find the necessary courage; we will find a

welcome and easily join the parade. For now however, with Bartimaeus, we sit, quietly, but with expectation.

**When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”**

Shouting can be fun. When words seem to fail me on occasion, offering no solace or solution, I usually say the same thing over and over, but louder each time. It helps me expel negative energy from my emotionally charged body. Shouting can be cathartic but it is rarely strategic. Shouting can waste a lot of time and energy. Shouting can help us connect with other people, initiatives, causes and experiences. Shouting over a distance can lead us to healthy and life-giving social connections.

In church, in politics, in life, even in the psalmist’s prayer where the festal shout elicits God’s attention, loud vocal complaint has its place. So what do we shout? What is the content of our complaint or desire? I often hear a desire for mercy, or in other words, care, respect, love, and community. Who does not seek any or all of these? I don’t see any raised hands. So we call out, with Bartimaeus, in a raised, emphatic and plaintive voice.

**Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.**

I love those words “Jesus stood still!” As I sit by the roadside this is my desire, my prayer. STOP . . . Everyone . . . Jesus! Pay attention to me and consider “the voice of my complaint.” My request is selfish I

know, but vital and real. Jesus . . . teacher, healer and saviour . . . to my own stillness, and my inability to find calm amidst particular storms, add *your* stillness, *your* attention, *your* healing and reconciling balm.

Jesus stood still . . . to still the heart of those who suffer, or are restless, or in some sort of particular need. One contemporary novelist describes anxiety in these words:

"Perhaps it is inescapable that when our lives are in flux, despite the comfort of our beds, we are bound to keep ourselves awake grappling with anxieties—no matter how great or small, how real or imagined" (A Gentleman in Moscow: A Novel, by Amor Towles)

With many Africans who live a life of Ubuntu, I am in others as they find place in me--we are together in community. And for Bartimaeus, who has been forced to life's sidelines, social reconnection is essential and life-giving. Let's see what happens.

**Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."**

Jesus asks Bartimaeus a simple though all-embracing question: "What do you want me to do for you?" It's cards-on-the-table time. Beyond Bartimaeus' need, what do *we* want or need in order to face the challenges of today and tomorrow? What obstacle needs to be removed so that *we* can carry on, carrying on? If we are promised that growing in faith is possible and desirable, through what process does this enhancement appear?

No stock answers here. As Christianity is relational, historical, spiritual and physical, what should we ask of God in order to move through these? For Bartimaeus, does he simply need physical sight? Possibly, but he likely needs more than that--I know many fully sighted persons locked in despair or spiritual confusion. Is his need related to a stigma associated with disability? This is likely. For all of us, at one time or another the need goes deeper and broader simultaneously.

How can we move beyond our own ego needs? Taking the image of an expanding physical universe as an analogy, how might we move from a love of self, to a love which is ever expanding to include others, everyone, every place? If we have decided to no longer sit at the roadside of life, then as we process with others in which direction do we move? Some days, it's hard to know. It really is. For Bartimaeus however, this was a good day; a very good day. He receives both direction and affirmation, both sorely needed and welcomed without question.

**Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.**

I gotta say, here's the Achilles heel with this passage. Many will read this and tell themselves, and others, that living the Christ life is simple. "Just do it" works well in other situations, but here, buyer beware! Life, and faith is neither simple nor simplistic.

If we are invited into the realm of Christ, which itself is ever expanding, there will be insecurity and uncertainty. Such instability will induce frustration, fatigue and fear! The Gospel of security and success preached by homiletical charlatans is a false religion. *Fake News*, I like to say. Christian conviction does not guarantee a life of

physical blessing and ease. Christian faith provides support and guidance through life's challenges but does not insulate us from the sting of suffering and pain.

Thankfully Christ shows us *the way through* such awful experiences. Look to the saints and martyrs. And look to tenacious and precious people in our midst, even in the room today for encouragement and inspiration.

I like to use the word *encouragement*--to find courage through the gift of another person-- when I think about my own faith journey and that of others. As we become more intentionally inclusive here at St. Paul's, as we welcome everyone to the adventure we call Christian faith in Anglican tradition here in the Thompson Rivers valley, as we re-commit ourselves to living God's way and walking in the path of Christ empowered by God, may God the Holy Spirit enliven and encourage us all, now and always. Amen.