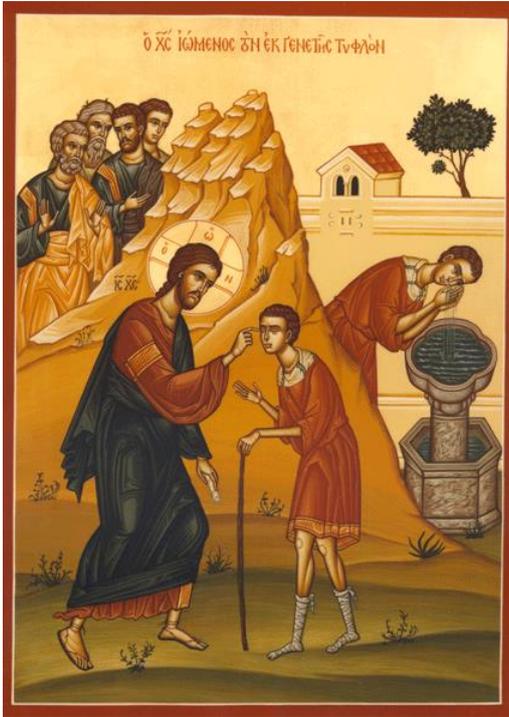


Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Mark 10:46 - 52

Who do you see?



I have often spoken, in sermons and services, about the power of stories. Stories invite imagination, reflection, and entry into the story. “What if that was me?” “What would I have done or thought if I had been there?” “Who am I in this story?” And this wonderful, evocative story of Bartimaeus the blind beggar on the road out of Jericho, invites all those responses. Who would I be? Maybe one of those in the crowd telling this scruffy beggar to stop making a scene? Or a disciple conflicted about wanting to help Bartimaeus but knowing how important the journey to Jerusalem is? Or maybe Bartimaeus himself; someone desperate and in need of God’s mercy? And there are undoubtedly sermons in those questions, and points of reflection for prayer.

But there is also an extra power in stories when you put them together, or sit them side by side,

something we can overlook in the story-by-story nature of the Lectionary. This is not just another healing story. Mark has placed the story here for the reader to make comparisons and contrasts. Some of you will remember that there is another story of Jesus healing a blind man - another evocative story with the man seeing people but they look like trees walking. That story is back a few chapters, just before Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” It opens a long section of interwoven stories with Jesus talking about humility and service and the disciples talking about greatness and glory. Like brackets, the two stories of the blind men compliment Jesus question of “Who do you say I am” with the unasked but obvious question, “Who do you see?”

Healing Bartimaeus is a great story, but it also raises issues by comparison and contrast with the stories that come before.

- “What do you want me to do for you?” The same question that Jesus asked James and John when they wanted to sit at Jesus right and left. What a contrast; a request for mercy rather than a request for glory.
- The disciples are following Jesus, a few paces behind, and they were amazed and afraid. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and follows Jesus with no hesitation. What a comparison.
- The rich man cannot consider losing his possessions to follow Jesus, the beggar does it with no qualms.
- Jesus tells the disciples to welcome the little ones and don’t put stumbling blocks in their way. The crowd tells Bartimaeus to be quiet! What a contrast and lesson.
- And all of those build into this wonderful question that all the contrasts raise. If Bartimaeus, a blind man sitting at the side of the road can see Jesus as both the Messiah and the source of divine mercy, why are the disciples - the ones closest to Jesus, day by day, - so blind to who they are following?

There is such a tumbling jumble of images and titles in this section of Mark's Gospel. Son of God, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of David, Rabbi, teacher, interpreter of the Law, and shining white divine being. Maybe the question, "Who do you see?" is not so simple and not just a reflection on the disciples' spiritual blindness compared to Bartimaeus' amazing insight. Maybe the question is deliberately, but subtly, raised by Mark for all those who read the Gospel - Who do you see?

The determined Saviour striding towards the cross, even though he knows it means suffering and death, on the God given mission to win reconciliation between God and people.

The open and welcoming teacher of God's grace, rejecting the strict requirements of Law and culture. Welcoming the mothers, including the children, and teaching service and humility.

The promised bringer of God's new way of health and wholeness and blessing. Stopping for the ill and those captive to society's judgement and bring new life.

The bold teacher of the new spirituality of love and connection to God. Set aside your fears of death, rejection, and cultural judgement, and embrace the way of love.

A blend of those and more; the determined Saviour of all who has the time and love to stop and bless a simple beggar.

There is something wonderfully invitational in this cluster of stories, capped by Bartimaeus' cry of "Son of David!" There has been no mention of David up to now in Mark's Gospel. No genealogical description like Matthew or Luke, no mention of birth in Bethlehem. Jesus just accepts this new way of seeing him and his mission and ministry. 'Who do you see?', seems to invite a variety of faithful answers. Son of God, Son of Man, Saviour, essence of the divine. Not one, clear, true answer and all the others are wrong, but a variety of ways to perceive Jesus as God's call to, and example of, the new way of love and life in connection to God. The essence is not, "Have you passed the theological exam and given the right answer?" but, "Follow me!" Follow in the way of service, humility, grace, and love, because that is the way of God.

As I said, and have said many times, there is a power in story, and juxtaposed stories, with the invitation to imagination, reflection, and entry into the story. Jesus in the Gospel narrative is walking towards Jerusalem and the cross, we, in our world, are rapidly walking towards Bethlehem and the manger. The same question hangs in the air for us all; who do you see and who do you follow?