

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

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Isaiah 61:1-4

Mark 10:46-52

What is your story about how you met Jesus? What is your story about what Jesus has done for you? Can you name it? Does anyone else know it? It may not be dramatic, but each of us has a story of faith, if we have faith at all. It may be a story of doubts and fears, or faith that is just clinging on, or it may be a story of triumphs and wonders. Or it may be somewhere in between this, the story of faith that gently illumines a fairly ordinary life. But you have a story.

Today we read the story of Bartimaeus and how he came to know Jesus. The fact that Mark gives us his name – which is not the case with many of the stories of Jesus healing people - makes us think that perhaps he became known as a disciple and was someone that Mark's first audience would have been familiar with. That would make his story important to them and of course to Bartimaeus himself. But is it important to us? And is it important to how we walk with Jesus through Lent – how we walk in learning and repentance, and in growth?

They came to Jericho, says Mark - and then they left. And Luke will tell us that in Jericho Jesus has his meeting with Zacchaeus. But Mark does not tell us of that, just as Luke does not tell this story. For Mark it is more important to tell of the man who was blind, and who would not be silenced when he learned that Jesus, his one hope of sight was passing by. Mark wants – maybe Bartimaeus himself wanted – to tell people that this was the change which Jesus made to this man. “Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus – you know who I mean,” Mark is saying. “Well, did you know that once he was an outcast, and a blind beggar? No, you would never think it now to look at him would you, but let me tell you how it was.” And he tells the story.

It is a story of transformation. There can be no greater change in life than being blind and then seeing. It is similar to the change made to the paralysed man who was let thorough the roof to have his sins forgiven and

his body made whole. Life changed utterly for Bartimaeus that day. He was living as a beggar, on the edge of town because he wouldn't be allowed in where the main business of life went on. He was blind and so there was the stigma of sin on him. That was just how people viewed the world. He was blind so he must have brought it on himself (or maybe his parents had), just as not so long ago – and maybe in some places still – good Christian people said that if someone had AIDS they must have brought it on themselves; they must have sinned.

And when he was given his sight, not only could he see the world, but the world could see him – could see him as a person, not just as a blind person – anyone with disability will know what I am talking about. And so the whole of life and the whole of how he saw himself would change for Bartimaeus. Now he was a whole person, and now he had a purpose other than survival: now he could follow Jesus.

At the end of February we thought about Paul's words that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. If you have a story of faith, then part of it will surely be about how having faith in Christ changes how you see yourself, what your identifying marks are. There is an advert just now on TV which is for – insurance I think, but I couldn't swear to it – which has a lot of anglers in the river and then as different identifying things are called out those who do not fit disappear, till in the end only one person is fully identified. For a Christian, that is the most important thing about them, the primary identifying mark. Bartimaeus was changed from having to identify first of all by his disability, to being able to identify first of all by who had healed and accepted him, and who he followed.

One of the purposes of the season of Lent is to take stock of where we are in our journey of faith, how we are doing with our following. This was one of the reasons I began the season by offering you little money bags for you to use to mark when you are humbly able to say that today I did something that showed who I follow.

So this healing is about identity and change, for Bartimaeus. But for Jesus, it is in many ways just a kind of getting on with the day job. He is on this planned journey that will end in Jerusalem. His mind is fixed on getting there and letting events unfold. But still as he goes he has encounters on the way, there are people who need something from him. Zacchaeus needs teaching and to understand where he has gone wrong. Bartimaeus needs his sight restored and his life turned around. And this has always been what Jesus has done, so even when his mind is set on the coming events, it is still what he does.

When Jesus began his ministry he took as his watchword the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for he has anointed me to speak good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the day of the Lord's favour. And even though the events of his life are now coming to a head, he will not forget that this is his manifesto. And so he hears Bartimaeus when he calls out to him, and he sends for him and listens to him. And he does what is needed and heals him. Because what may be coming but has not happened yet is never a reason not to get on with the day job.

And this is true for all of us. Life is full of many distractions. We face difficulties and worries; we live with problems and potential problems which occupy our minds. But none of it is a reason not to get on with being a follower of Jesus. Being in the middle of a personal crisis is never a reason to treat others with discourtesy, never a good excuse for lost tempers or curt and hurtful words. If we follow Jesus then we seek to learn to trust God with every part of our lives, to give our worries and problems into his care and trust him with them. Sometimes when we pray about our own concerns, we forget to leave them with God. We bring them to God and then snatch them back to our selves so that we can fret and worry over them anew. But if we are to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, in the way that he travelled which led to the cross, then we must learn what it means to trust.

To trust God with our concerns means not to let them dominate our lives. It means not to be so self-involved that we fail to see the needs and lives of others, that we fail to treat others with the concern and attention that Jesus would give them – that Jesus gives to us. We read this story of Bartimaeus at a time when our nation is preoccupied with the coronavirus pandemic. It is top of every news bulletin; it is beginning to change the way that we live our lives – subtly for some but radically for others. Our task in these days is never to let go of our faith or what that faith tells us should be our way of living with others.

We are told that our call as Christians is to live showing love to all, even to our enemies. And in a time of crisis this is still our call – to think more of what is good for others than of what suits ourselves. What is good for others may change in a time like this, we may need to think about what we can do to help keep others safe in a way that we have not had to do before. But it is still our calling, to follow the one who loved the world so much that he was prepared to die to save us. Yes, for a while the patterns of life may be changing, but we are still called to follow Jesus, to identify as his

disciples and to seek to live with others as he would – he who cared for blind Bartimaeus even when his mind was set on his journey to the crisis awaiting him in Jerusalem.

Because I care about you, I will not shake hands with anyone today. Refusing to shake hands used to be a sign that someone didn't care for you, was even willing insult you, but in today's circumstances it has become a sign of thoughtfulness and care. Because we care for each other, we need to be aware of who is vulnerable and who might need to stay away from coming to church for a while, and find ways – the telephone is always useful – to make sure that they know that they are not forgotten. Because we care for our neighbours we need to be as vigilant as ever for ways in which we can serve them – even if sometimes serving them is to leave them alone.

Bartimaeus became a follower of Jesus and his story is recorded. All of us who follow Jesus are writing our stories of faith, and even if to us they seem unremarkable – who would not like to have as dramatic a tale as Bartimaeus to tell? – yet if we are faithful to our calling, as Jesus was faithful to his, then our stories will be woven into the great story of Jesus' kingdom coming. Amen.