

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

## **You are Special**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

Song of Songs 2:8-17

Mark 10:32-52

The verse with which we finished our Gospel reading last week, says this: "But many who are last will be first, and the first will be last." In her sermon, Mary reminded us that the women and children, whose rights and needs are addressed in the first fifteen verses of this chapter, were regarded as very much the last and the least in society, while the rich, like the rich man who offers to follow Jesus, come in for challenge and criticism, although in their world they were very much top dogs.

This week we see that theme of the last being first and the first last worked out in two different incidents, two stories which are about people asking Jesus for something. In the first story, we see James and John asking to sit beside Jesus in his glory. They want to be first, first with Jesus and first to be seen with a triumphant leader. Have they not heard what he has just been telling them - yet again? That when they reach Jerusalem, where he is leading them, where he is determined to go, he will be condemned to death, abused and killed. Maybe they have only heard the last few words - that he will rise again. Maybe they have heard the words - and this is the third time Jesus has told his disciples what is to happen - but the pictures in their own mind are still that this is going to turn into a triumphal procession to Jerusalem, and that though things may be tough for a time, they are going to come out on top. When Jesus comes out on top, and I am sure that the brothers are thinking of a temporal triumph, a triumph over the authorities in Jerusalem, they want to be seen to be with him, to get the reflected glory of being known as his right hand men (or right and left hand men).

When they asked for their favour, the brothers were saying to Jesus that they knew he was special - he was going to be exalted, he was going to have glory. Jesus was special, and they wanted to be special right along-side him.

Today is the end of the Paralympic Games. The athletes will be going home tomorrow. But some of them, those who have what are classed as "intellectual disabilities", may have another chance to compete before the next Paralympics in 2016. For in 2015 the next Special Olympics, for athletes with intellectual disabilities will be held in Los Angeles. The Special Olympics have been run as an international competition since 1968, for people who are special in their needs because of lower levels of brain function, who are in that sense, special. Not better, but different. Not superior or inferior, but not just like everyone else. That is what it means to be special. It means that you are, in the eyes of the world, or in the eyes of your society or your family, or maybe just one other person, different from anyone, from everyone else. And that is what James and John wanted to be - different, as Jesus was different.

Bartimaeus was special already. He was different from everyone else, because he was blind. That didn't mean that he got special help with his life: it meant the opposite - he was regarded as the least and last and lowest. It wasn't a specialness that he relished, but a distinction he would far rather be without. So when he came to Jesus his request was in some ways the direct opposite of what the sons of Zebedee wanted: he asked to stop being special. He wanted to be just like everyone else, to be able to see. He asked for Jesus to have mercy, because he did not see his specialness as a

blessing but a curse. And when Jesus healed him, restoring his sight, he followed Jesus on the way, the way that was to lead to Jerusalem.

So what can we conclude from these two stories? That Jesus wants people to be ordinary, and not special? He doesn't grant the Sons of Thunder what they ask for, although he does promise them some of the suffering - the cup and the baptism - that he will also undergo. He does promise them the chance of walking with him the terrible road which will lead to his glory. But James and John are not to be allowed the distinction they desire, and Bartimaeus is to be rid of the distinction that he hates: and all Jesus' followers are to be the same?

The other scripture that we read this morning was from that wonderful poem, the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. A love poem, and not often read in worship, because, well because it is a love poem - and one written by a woman, or as if by a woman, at that. Written, it would seem, for Solomon and not by him. It is a love poem and it never even mentions God, but it has been placed in the Bible as Scripture, and, as St. Paul tells us, "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction" (2Timothy 3:16). How can the Song of Songs be useful? It is a poem of love and passion. It uses imagery which can be taken in more than one way. Can it be useful? I think so, and I think its use, or one of its uses, is for correction. The Song is the paean of joy proclaimed by one who loves and knows herself beloved. There is no greater joy in the world than to love and be beloved, to know that to one person, a person who is supremely special to you, you also are of first importance, that you, and you alone, can bring joy to the one who brings joy to you. Such love is not just the privilege of the young, though each generation discovers it again as a fresh experience, and finds it hard to believe that their elders also know this joy.

And this is the joy we can know when we realise that God loves us. God really loves us. God loves us together, as his creation: that might not be so hard to understand and appreciate. But God loves each one of us: me and you and your neighbour, in the delight-filled and delight-filling way of the singer of the Song of Songs. God comes to us and tells us, tells you, tells me, that you and I are special to him. When we read the Song of Songs it can re-awaken our love and passion, the feelings we had, perhaps, when first we became Christians and realised what it meant that God had sent his Son to die for us. It can remind us that our faith is not just a matter of the mind of giving mental assent to a series of truths, but it is a living, loving relationship with One who loves us above all else. God speaks to us and we exclaim "The voice of my beloved!" and listen with breathless attention, because what our beloved says to us, will always be the most important thing in the world.

When people are in love, they so often want to spread the love, to show their joy by making others happy. The Song of Songs reminds us that the way we enter into service for others is in that mood: we do it out of joy that we are so beloved, we are beloved and we may rejoice in it by serving: we do not serve out of grim duty, because we must.

You are special and Jesus came to let people know that they were special. Bartimaeus was special in that Jesus did not want him to feel left out and handicapped in life. James and John were special, because Jesus would protect them from the inappropriate thing that they asked for. They asked to be with Jesus in his glory. But, such is the topsy-turvy nature of God's Kingdom, Jesus was exalted in glory when he was nailed to the cross and set upon a hill, condemned and despised by all who saw him. James and John did not understand that. They did not know what it would mean to be at his right and left in that day, and that honour, which was shame, was not reserved for them but for two thieves. The brothers were too special to Christ for him to honour their request.

Instead he used it to teach a lesson to all his special followers. It is a lesson about God's upside-down kingdom: where the greatest are not served, but serve. That too is a lesson of love. The more we love someone, the more we are willing to put ourselves out for them, to give and give up, to

work and change.

The world, which expects us to be selfish, tells us to look after ourselves, to have "me time", not to lose our sense of identity in our labours for others. But Jesus doesn't say that. Jesus gave and gave and went on giving. We have seen how he would change his plans when the crowds needed him, even if he was tired, and wanted time out. We have seen how he would go on teaching and teaching even when his acts of healing were misunderstood. Even in our reading this morning we see him setting his face to Jerusalem, although he knew that personally it would be disastrous for him. Why? Because it was necessary. Because it was the loving thing to do for all the special people he wanted to save. And in acting as he did, not putting himself first, Jesus was not smothered by others. He did not lose his sense of self - who in history was more his own man than Jesus of Nazareth? He knew why he had come and what he had to do:

"The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."  
(v:45)

Jesus was special. James and John were absolutely right about that. And they were special too - they were right about that as well. They were special enough to be saved from their desires. And Bartimaeus was special, so that he could be given his sight and allowed to follow Jesus on the road. And you are special, for the Son of Man came to serve you and to do so to the extent of giving his life for you. You are special, because God loves you as his best beloved, as though you were the only one in the world for him. You are special because you have, like James and John, like Bartimaeus, been allowed to follow Jesus on the road of servant-hood.

The church is made up of special people, each different, unique, and each one called by God to live in mutual service, and in service for the world which will not understand such a way of life. Recently there was an incident of vandalism at St. Bride's church. I expect that one of the reasons behind it, was that at the back of the young vandals' minds was the vague understanding that a church is a special place and the things in it are in some way holy.

You see they don't understand. People don't understand at all. The building is only special because in it people come together to listen to the voice of our beloved. The Bible is only special because through it we hear what our beloved is saying to us. It is the people who are holy - you and me - holy because special, because ransomed by Jesus and called to follow him. If anyone thinks that by doing some slight damage to a building or a book they are attacking what is real about the church they are very wide of the mark. And our response to such a happening should not be to hide away, but to turn the other cheek, even as our beloved told us. Our response should be to reach out in love. Our response should be to see how we can serve.

That was Jesus' response, and what made him special. He says that you are special and beloved: let us live in the joy of that conviction and spread the joy in lives of service.

Amen.