

Jesus meets Bartimaeus

[Mark 10:46-52]

Bartimaeus was blind. We do not know much about him. In an age when writing was slow and expensive the gospel writers did not have the space to say very much and we have to use our imagination if we are to understand more.

Blindness is a terrible disability. It was and still is very difficult for a blind person to earn his or her own living, so they become very dependent on others, which is a humbling experience. If those they depended on were poor, or they had no one to support them, begging became the only option. We are left to understand all this and more from the simple statement that Bartimaeus was a blind beggar.

Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus and concluded that he was the Son of David, the expected Messiah. Physically blind he may have been, spiritually blind he was not.

Then one day, almost miraculously, he heard a crowd coming and that Jesus the Messiah was the cause of the crowd. He must have almost burst with excitement and he shouted out for Jesus to have pity on him. He would only get one chance. If the crowd passed on he would not be able to follow and it was very unlikely that Jesus would pass that way again. In fact we know that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he was killed and never passed that way again. For Bartimaeus it was now or never.

Many of the people in the crowd told him to keep quiet. Handicapped people were often despised as if their handicap was their own fault and many of the crowd had not learnt the way Jesus thought and worked, even though they were physically following him. Perhaps too the people in the crowd would have known that Jesus was making an important journey on the way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. It was too important to stop or delay for a blind man. But for Jesus Bartimaeus was important. A few minutes delay on the 25 Km / 15 mile journey were of no consequence and Bartimaeus was in need.

Bartimaeus was insistent. He shouted as loud as he could: "Jesus, Son of David, help me".

Fortunately Jesus heard him. He told the crowd to call Bartimaeus, In this way he involved them in the action. Where they had turned Bartimaeus away, they now had to bring him. They were made to change their attitude. Bartimaeus himself was so excited and in such a hurry that threw off his outer cloak so that he could go all the faster.

Jesus then asked Bartimaeus what he wanted. I am sure Jesus knew, but he wanted Bartimaeus to say it. So Jesus healed him and he followed Jesus among the crowd on the road to Jerusalem.

For me the most important lesson of this story is that Jesus healed people and that he has the power to heal today. But we must not fall into the trap of thinking that because Jesus healed Bartimaeus he will heal every blind person today.

There are also some lessons to be learnt about the faith and understanding that Bartimaeus showed. There were several steps to this. Firstly he had heard about Jesus, probably that Jesus was healing people. This encouraged him in his faith and longing that Jesus would heal him. Secondly he concluded that Jesus must be the Messiah who all Israel expected to come at some time. Unlike the religious leaders he was not threatened by this thought, so he was free to believe it. Thirdly he was awake to the fleeting opportunity as Jesus passed within earshot. Fourthly he was so eager for healing that he would take no rebuttal from the people who were following Jesus. He shouted out in determination to be healed.

Fifthly, after he was healed, he joined with the disciples and crowd following Jesus. These are all pointers to the sort of faith that we should have.

We should also look at ourselves and compare ourselves with the crowd. Would we turn away someone from Jesus because we consider them to be unimportant? Would we be ready to turn back to that person if Jesus called him?

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

The name of the blind man “Bartimaeus” actually means “Timaeus’s son”. “Bar” meant “son”. It is quite common in the Middle East even today to refer to people as the son of someone or the father of someone. While I was in the Middle East I was often called “Abu Timothy”, meaning “Father of Timothy” (my first son) or “Wad Gordon” meaning “Son of Gordon”, it being erroneously thought that my father’s name was “Gordon”.

The crowd apparently told Bartimaeus that “Jesus of Nazareth” was coming. For them Jesus was a man from Nazareth. But for Bartimaeus Jesus was the “Son of David”, something much more.

In fact it was common and still is in the Middle East to call a person after their town or village of origin. This was also done in England in the past. My wife’s maiden name is “Chard”, presumably from the town of that name in Somerset.

“Son of David” was a well-known title of the Messiah.

Blind people had strong legal protection under the Old Testament [e.g. Leviticus 19:14]. It was a great offence to lead a blind person astray. However if a blind person was a priest he was also denied certain religious rights normally granted to priests [e.g. Leviticus 21:18].

Bartimaeus addressed Jesus as “Rabbouni”. The Greek Mark’s Gospel does not translate this word. It uses the original Aramaic word. This means literally (like the similar word “Rabbi”) “my master” or “my lord”. It was used as a term of respect for religious teachers in Judaism. Some English translations leave the word “Rabbi” and some translate it.

Jesus said to Bartimaeus: “Your faith has healed you”. We have seen of course that it was Jesus who healed the man in response to his faith. Perhaps we might say that it was the man’s faith in coming to Jesus and shouting out for his attention that led to his being healed. Or perhaps I am missing something.

Some people will look at the story and see it as a picture of Jesus healing those who are spiritually blind. My own feeling is that this is acceptable as long as it is not used as an excuse to deny the physical healing.

BARTIMA.DOC