

My first encounter with what it may have been like, when Jesus and his disciples came across Blind Bartimaeus was on a visit to Alexandria, the great port city on the Mediterranean in Egypt. Large bands of beggars would rove up and down the *Corniche*. These beggars, some with missing limbs, blind and/or deaf and other disabilities (some self inflicted) would patrol the seafront looking for alms.

Bartimaeus was an embarrassment; he had been ever since he went blind. He would sit there on that mat, tin cup in hand, begging for alms. “Gifts for the poor! Gifts for the poor!” he would cry out in his darkness. And people would step around him, though some would dare to place a coin in his coffer. “Thank you, kind sir! May the Lord bless you for your generosity!” And then his litany would resume again: “Gifts for the poor! Gifts for the poor!”

It hadn't always been this way. The son of Timaeus was born a healthy baby boy. He played with the other children in Jericho, he even attended school. But then something happened; Bartimaeus lost his sight, and became “persona non grata” in his hometown. His family put him out on the street, the synagogue deemed him a sinner, and his friends abandoned him. Oh, he did have one colleague, a fellow blind beggar who joined him on the street, but that was the extent of his contact with humanity.

But this day, he was all alone on the roadside, when he heard the commotion of an approaching crowd. “It's Jesus!” someone whispered. “It's Jesus, so shut up and don't humiliate us!” But this only gave Blind Bartimaeus impetus to call out all the more. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Men surrounded him; they shielded him from Jesus' sight, but there was no quieting his voice. “Jesus, have mercy! Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And then, amazingly, Jesus stopped. “Call him here.” And suddenly, the man's life was changed forever.

When he came face-to-face with the Saviour, Jesus asked the man “What do you want me to do for you?” It seems like a silly question, doesn't it? Hello! Jesus! Isn't it obvious what the man is asking for? Didn't you notice that he was blind? But the question Jesus asked was, as always, insightful and brilliant. He wanted the man to be specific. The blind man did not ask for pity, or financial security, or protection from the locals. He was quick with his request: “I want my sight back.” And Jesus was just as immediate with his response: “Go!” Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you.” No spittle in this healing story, no showing of one's self to the religious authorities. Jesus saw in this blind man two things; a desire for change, and belief that Jesus could provide it. So he did. And from that moment on, he was a follower of the Saviour.

I wonder what I'd have asked for. That is to say, I wonder what need is so pressing in my life that, if I had the undivided attention of the Son of God, what would my request be? What would yours be? This isn't a genie popping out of a lamp and offering you three wishes; it is God asking what our heart's desire is for this life. So, what would you say? What would I say? Don't answer too quickly, as they say be careful what you wish for... but dwell on that provocative question for a moment while I tell you a story. When I spent time In Zimbabwe as a USPG missionary I felt like a socio-economic and ethnic minority for the first time in my life. At Church, I was one of only three white faces in a sea of black. In the Bulawayo market, I wasn't merely the only white person, I was among the few wearing shoes! Everywhere I

went, I was the wealthy, healthy white one. When I was approached by a roving gang of small children rushing towards me in Masvingo, I assumed they would beg for money. I clutched my pocket, and I felt for my wallet. Here came the poorest of the poor! And when the children finally reached me, do you know what they asked for? They asked, “Will you take my picture? Will you take my picture?” And when I had snapped several photos of these beautiful children with my polaroid automatic, they began to squeal with delight “Now let me see it! Let me see what you see!”

Ultimately, that was the request of the blind man that Jesus met on the road outside of Jericho that day. The man simply wanted to see what everyone else saw. But the real miracle that day is that, when the man gained his sight, he chose to follow Jesus. He was not satisfied to merely see the sights, to find familiar faces and places in his hometown. He wanted to see the world from Jesus’ point of view ... to see the people and the places and the problems and the possibilities that Jesus saw. So he chose to leave behind what would have certainly been a notorious reputation (“I once was blind, but now I see!” John Newton). And we never hear from this man again in scripture, but because he became a follower of the way we hear his name Blind Bartimaeus. What we do know is that once Jesus gave the man his sight, the man was no longer content to hang around Jericho. He wanted to see the world through Jesus’ eyes.

And that brings me back to the question: What do you want Jesus to do for you? In truth, he has already done so much, what else is there? Christians — especially Christians in the West — are the proverbial “what do you give to people who already have everything?” We have forgiveness for our sins, we have the promise of life eternal, and we have the keys to the kingdom of heaven. What else is there? What else could we possibly want Jesus to do for us? Perhaps only this; to see the world as Jesus sees it. To look at the people of our world with compassion instead of judgment. To see people and treat them with forgiveness and grace instead of rejection judgement and scorn. In short, to see others the same way Jesus sees us, and then, to love them.

But I fear that those who profess to be Christians are some of the most blind people on the planet. If Jesus came back and told the story of the Good Samaritan, we might be the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side. If Jesus entered most of our “synagogues,” I expect that we would be the Pharisees whose lukewarm lives would make him suffer on the cross again. And more optimistically perhaps if we saw ourselves through Jesus’ eyes, we might want to join him, too!

Fifteen years ago, I was involved in crafting a Parish Mission Statement at a parish in Geelong- we were pleased with what we created: “Grounded in Faith, Gathered in Love, and Sent with a Purpose: so that others may gain the Kingdom of God!” Upon hearing it, one member of the church asked me, “Others? Others? What about us? This Church is about us- we are the members who come along most weeks, we are the ones who have to pay the bills, we are the ones that mow the lawns and clean the church- we are the ones who need to be looked after; we are the ones that fill or not fill the pews!” This place stands or falls because of us- not others.”

If any of that resonates with you I call and challenge you to see that through Jesus’ eyes and think what he would say in response- I humbly suggest it would be bit like this: once you come to a faith, the gospel is always about others. You are the blind beggar on that road to

Jericho! I have given you light and life. But once you see the world as I see see it, you will not sit on your mats any longer.”

I have a prayer-dare for us: I dare us to ask Jesus to let us see our world with his eyes. I dare us to ask Jesus to make you and me acutely aware of our attitude and behaviour towards others. Imagine if Christians around the world took this dare seriously; to see and to act as the eyes and the hands of Christ! Why, it would change the world. May we use our freedom and the abundance of his riches to be his servants in the world, and reflect his glorious light! May this begin today for you and for me. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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