

Brackenhurst Methodist Church 5 July 2009
Seeing in black and white

Welcome & Notices

Scripture:

Mark 10:32-52

Message

INTRODUCTION

- One of the things that I'm speaking about lately is my own journey
 - And how I view and experience the church
 - * Some of that I'm challenging in my "God is bigger than" sermon series, but today want to look at how we see God
- Because the way we see God
 - And particularly how we see God revealed in Jesus
 - * Will inform the way we see the church and, in turn, Christianity
 - * How we see God is vital to our faith
- And I think sometimes it's almost as though we see God / Jesus as a kind of a divine Santa Claus

"He knows when you've naughty, he knows when you've been nice
He knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!"
- And if we are good then, when we come to him with our Christmas lists, our prayers, he will give us what we want
 - And if we don't get what we want, well, then maybe we weren't doing something right.
 - * There must be unconfessed sin in my life, so God will punish me by withholding the answer to my prayers
- So we don't get what we want, and we give up on Christianity
 - Or we think we must have been really bad and God is punishing us and we get tired of it so we give up on Christianity
 - Or we decide that we will never be good enough, so we give up on Christianity
- We get frustrated with Christianity and the church because we don't understand who Jesus is.
 - Now I'm going to be speaking more about this in my next "Why I..." sermon in a couple of weeks
 - * when I look at why Jesus is not my Saviour

- but for today I want to look at a question that Jesus asks two groups of people, and who respond to him very differently
 - * And how those two stories teach us to be church
- You see, very often when we look at the stories that we read today we read them separately.
 - We take the story of James and John coming to Jesus wanting positions of power and authority as one story
 - And then we take the story of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus as another
 - * Jesus healed a blind man, hallelujah!
- And while there is a mostly a break in our Bibles, when the stories were originally written there was no break
 - The breaks are artificial ones added by editors in the last 30 years.
- So sometimes I think that it is helpful to look beyond the breaks in the text
 - And when we do that, particularly in this story, we discover that the two stories are meant to be taken together
 - * There is a question, and a theme that links them
- The theme is this: How do people see Jesus?
 - How do his followers see him?
 - How does the blind man see him?
 - And what is Jesus up to?
- And the answer, which I'll look at in a moment, is this:
 - Jesus' disciples do not see who he is
 - * The blind man does
 - * The blind man sees what Mark has Jesus stating right at the beginning of this gospel: That the Kingdom of God is at hand (1:14)
 - And there's a delicious irony in that
 - * The outcast, who had no sight, was the only one out of close followers and crowds who could truly see who Jesus was.
- And then the question which crystallises for us the difference between James and John and Bartimaeus.
 - The same question is asked in both stories
 - * Jesus asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?"
 - And the responses are telling in how they saw Jesus
- And it's fascinating because Jesus' disciples, who have been following him since the start of his ministry
 - the third and fourth disciples called to follow Jesus
 - * Who even now are travelling on the way to Jerusalem with Jesus to the cross

- Still don't know who he is
- And so they come to Jesus and Jesus asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?"
 - They respond, "We want to sit at your right and your left in your glory."
 - * They're looking for power, and status, and prestige
 - Jesus' message that he is going to die still hasn't sunk in.
- And then Bartimaeus who could so easily have been prevented from meeting with Jesus by the crowd
 - He fights for an opportunity to meet Jesus, and Jesus asks him the same question
- "What do you want me to do for you?"
 - And he responds very differently:
 - * He understands, he sees, who Jesus is, he knows Jesus can help him
 - He says, "rabbi, I want to see"
- He sees, but still he asks for the gift of sight.
 - Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the way
- Mark makes it quite clear that Bartimaeus is the model to imitate. (& ff: Wright, NT. Mark for everyone, p143)
 - Unlike the disciples, who hadn't really understood what Jesus was about
 - * Bartimaeus is already a man of faith, courage and discipleship
- So what is it that we can learn from the model of Bartimaeus?
 - What characterises his response?
- Firstly, response comes from a seeing of the Christ
 - But not as a political Messiah as others did
- His response comes from his own inadequacy
 - Outcast, hopeless, rejected (vs disciples who thought they had rights)
- His response requires a willingness to leave behind
 - Easy vs challenge

(1) Seeing the Christ

- One of the difficulties that the sighted followers of Jesus had, I think, is that they saw and a world and a Christ who were on a collision course with one another
 - And that's quite true
 - * Jesus was going to Jerusalem for that very confrontation
 - But they saw the Christ as one who would bring political freedom.
- Now we can go back through the history of the nation of Israel, and look at the journey they had walked
 - Firstly as people called by God, yet slaves in Egypt

- Then as people in Exile in Babylon
- Then after that as a people captive to whichever other country was in the ascendancy
 - * Persia, Greece and now Rome
- All through this journey they understood that because they were God's chosen people — God had called them
 - And the theology does get more complicated
 - * But because they were God's chosen people the time was coming when God would send his anointed one
 - The Messiah, in Greek, the Christ — not God's son!
 - * Who was going to lead them to victory over the occupying forces
- The Messiah was to be political, the Messiah was to be a soldier, the Messiah was going to be king of the new dispensation
 - And so the request of James and John was really quite natural for two young men harbouring ambitions of advancement in the coming kingdom
 - * Two young men who expected Jesus, the Messiah, to be king in just a few weeks
- Bartimaeus, however, sees Jesus quite differently, and much more simply:
 - He sees Jesus as one who is indeed the awaited Messiah
 - * But as a Messiah who has come to take away the darkness
 - The darkness of his own blindness and to invite him into a new way of life
- Because really that was the only message Jesus proclaimed, and it is the same message that God had called the Jewish nation to for more than 1300 years before that
 - The Messiah was not the one who would bring victory against Rome, but was the one who would offer a radically new way of living

(2) His own inadequacy

- So the example that Bartimaeus sets for us firstly is to see the one who offers a new way of living
 - And then, secondly, shows us the need to recognise the inadequacy of our lives at present.
- See, it's all very well to recognise that somebody offers a better way of doing things, but if we're happy with the way things are, then what is the reason for changing?
 - If the washing powder we use washes clean enough, then why do we need to change to a different washing powder?

- * That's why all the washing powder ads show how much cleaner the new powder washes than the old one — It's better!
- Bartimaeus, through his blindness, and no doubt the comments of those who passed him every day, was able to see that things weren't the way they ought to be
 - I think that in that there is the gift of prophecy
 - * ability to see that things need to change
- They say that there are none so blind as those who will not see.
 - I think that Jesus followers were unwilling to see who Jesus was, and unwilling to hear where he was going
 - * The only thing they could see was their own moment of glory
- Bartimaeus was stuck in his own inadequacy day by day, he had no option but to recognise where he was
 - Perhaps for many of us the way we begin our Christian journey is out of our own inadequacy.
 - * Christ meets us in our place of deep need
- Bartimaeus knew exactly where he was in his social status in society, and it was probably right near the bottom.
- You know, I really want to speak about the church this morning, because it is in the church that I find my frustration
 - I think that as a church we don't know who we are, or who we are meant to be.
 - * We think we have rights in society
 - * Rights to this, rights to that, rights to the next thing
- When really we are very similarly placed to Bartimaeus
 - We're very often blind to the real world around us, and people watch us begging at the roadside, and laugh at us
 - * The reason they laugh at us is that we don't realise that we're blind beggars, but think that we have a position of influence and power
- We need to realise who we are, and who the Christ is
 - Just as Bartimaeus did.
 - * We need to confess our own inadequacy

(3) A Willingness to leave Behind

- After seeing the Christ, and recognising his own inadequacy
 - Thirdly Bartimaeus demonstrates a willingness to leave his past as a beggar behind
 - * he recognised that this new way of life would be costly

- While disciples had all left their own homes to follow Jesus, they had become more and more convinced of their place in the kingdom
 - Jesus is trying to tell them that things are going to change
 - * They must forsake the power and prestige that they long for
 - * They're not going to get positions of power in Jerusalem
- They have to leave those thoughts and be willing to embrace another kind of life that is going to be far more difficult
 - One that is going to involve suffering, and even death
- Bartimaeus had to give up begging
 - What does this mean?
- Bartimaeus had a life in which he was comfortable
 - Probably as soon as he was old enough, because he was blind he would have been unable to learn anything, to take up a trade
 - * So as soon as he was old enough he would have been sent out to the street to beg.
- So as much as we would look at being a blind beggar and wonder who would willingly do that it was, for him, probably a place of comfort
 - He knew who he was, he had a status, even if lowly, he probably had friends on the street, and a place to sleep
 - He could get from where he slept to where he begged, pick a few coins each day, and in some manner look after himself
- So when Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he can do for him, and Bartimaeus answers that he wants to see
 - He is recognising that his whole life is going to be transformed because he is going to have to start to work for a living
 - * He is going to have to learn a trade
 - * He is going to have to stop relying on other people
 - * He is going to have to become independent
- No more hand-outs
 - Seeing comes with a cost!
 - He is willing to leave his past behind

CONCLUSION

- Jurgen Moltmann, a famous theologian, still alive, said this in 1989: "All you people who are concerned about the future of the church, I say to you, forget about the church. Think about the Kingdom, and his righteousness, and a living church will be given unto you."

- So, the church today, if Jesus were to ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” I wonder how it would respond?
 - * Are we so focussed on the Church that we don’t see the Kingdom which proclaims sight for the blind
- See the story of the healing of Bartimaeus, while it teaches us on how we ought to see Jesus also, in the context of the story, becomes a sign
 - And it is a sign that Jesus is trying to open the eyes of his followers, the church
 - * And faith consists of recognising who Jesus is, and then being willing to follow him, regardless of the cost
- When we look with Bartimaeus’ eyes at the kingdom which Jesus proclaims we do not see someone who calls us to wealth and prosperity, to comfort
 - But instead to healing and to the offer of new sight and new life — and very often discomfort.
- The church’s response to Jesus’ question, determines how Christ answers us
 - When Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” what do we say?
- Do we ask for the status to follow Jesus into Jerusalem, where we will abandon him to the cross
 - Or do we truly understand who Jesus is?
- Do we have the faith, courage and discipleship as a church to see who Jesus really is, to leave our begging, even though it may be comfortable, and to join Jesus on the way
 - the way to the cross.
- See, I don’t believe that Jesus wants us to be warm and comfortable, building kingdoms of our own
 - He calls us to abandon our kingdom vision, Just as James and John had to abandon their ideas of what Kingdom was
 - * And he calls us, he invites us, to join him in his.
 - * And opens our eyes to what that Kingdom vision is
- Bartimaeus could see that!
 - But it requires an enormous amount of him
- He recognises that he cannot stay the way he is
 - He needs to learn a new way of life, a new way of doing things
 - * It is going to be costly
- As a church, perhaps we need to hear that.
- When Bartimaeus says, “Rabbi, I want to see...”, we need to say, yes, that is indeed our prayer
 - It must be our prayer

- * To see the way Jesus sees and to become prophetic in society
- * To see where the church should be going
- * To see what the church and the Kingdom of God is meant to be
- And I'm sure that there is no need for me to remind you that the church is made up of individuals, you and me.
- I pray that we would have the vision of Bartimaeus.
 - May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayer of response

- Open the eyes of my heart

Holy Communion

- Closing Song

Benediction

Doxology