



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

22nd Sunday After Pentecost – October 24, 2021

Scripture Passages: Job 42.1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I was blind, but now I see.” These are some of the most recognizable hymn words ever written. Much ink has been spilt about this oft sung and much loved hymn Amazing Grace. And no wonder, with the message that forgiveness and redemption are possible regardless of sins committed and that we can be delivered from despair through the mercy of God. Of course, they were written by John Newton – an 18th English sailor and once captain of slave ships who knew what it was like to commit the worst kind of sin against his fellow human beings. But he also knew from the inside, conviction and repentance, and that Amazing Grace that he describes. His journey from cruel oppressor to champion of the abolition of slavery movement joining William Wilberforce is the stuff of legend. But nothing can dull the poignancy of those words written to summarize his spiritual journey of one man who turned his face from God but who was transformed by God’s love in time.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

And here we have a gospel all about seeing – all the permutations of seeing: being seen, having sight restored, and seeing others.

I used to have this children’s bible story book: Read Aloud Bible Stories Volume 1. It was second or even third hand to us – dog eared and much loved. It was one of my kids’ favourites – largely because the stories were so cleverly and dramatically presented.

The great thing about the way this story of Bartimaeus was told in the children’s book is the way the actual healing of the blind man was portrayed.

The blind beggar – who would otherwise have been ignored by a large crowd gathered around Jesus – unseen, ignored, tolerated maybe – cries out – and even though his cries for help are shushed by the crowd as someone who doesn't matter, should be seen and not heard, Jesus sees him. Like, really sees him. Doesn't dismiss him. Sees him in his distress, in his need, in his hope and belief that Jesus could do what no one else had ever been able to do – and give him his sight. And Jesus asks what he wants him to do and Bartimaeus asks for restoration of his sight.

The illustration on the page is wonderful: we're reminded that all you see at the crucial moment are hands - Jesus' hands over Bartimaeus' eyes. This is Jesus seeing Bartimaeus. That's how God sees us. With love, and the hope of newness.

And then the next page is even more evocative – it is just Bartimaeus' opened and sighted eyes on a background of black taking in the people, his surroundings – the beautiful colours - and most importantly the hands of his healer and now Lord, Jesus – it is Bartimaeus seeing with the eyes of faith.

And the next page is the disciples watching in amazement and Bartimaeus' profound gratitude – expressed by the tear coming from his healed and wide-open eyes – a man now on the good road with his Saviour – seeing the world literally through gospel eyes.

The impact of this picture – even on an adult who has read it many times is always remarkable. I am always moved by it. In this picture, we understand that Bartimaeus sees Jesus as the great physician, the healer, . . . the Lord. Mark tells us, “Immediately he regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.”

This beautiful healing story of Bartimaeus is there in the Gospel of Mark for a reason. I mean it's there obviously on its own merits, but it also shows us something else related to sight. That's something that I've been noticing for a few weeks now as we make our way through the Gospel of Mark.

Way back in chapter 8, Jesus cures another blind man, but it takes a while before he can see fully – that happens at Bethsaida. This is significant – so hold onto that detail for a minute. And then moving through chapter 8 of the Gospel, chapter nine and now in ten it turns out that three times Jesus tries to tell the disciples some bad news – that he's going into Jerusalem to die. And three times they really don't want to know. And added to that, three times Jesus tries to tell them what Christian leadership looks like and three times they, I think, willfully misunderstand him. Because they don't want to think about what it will be like to carry on without him.

And then comes another healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus. So it occurs to me that this story is actually more about gaining sight than it is about blindness - because of where it sits in the whole chapter.

And that's because a kind of partial blindness begins this series of miscommunications and a joyful sightedness and healing ends it.

Could it be that by the time we get to Bartimaeus the disciples understand who Jesus is at last? I don't think I'm too making much of this parenthetical thing. I think it really is there to help us see the truth that's unfolding before us in Mark's Gospel – the truth that's dawning on the disciples – that Jesus is who he says he is. He is the Son of God, he is the Lord. I think this is borne out by what happens next in Mark's gospel – Jesus enters Jerusalem, hailed as a king.

But just as on the page in the book where Bartimaeus having regained his sight sees the hands of Christ giving him healing and freedom, there are also others in the background. Those are people who live in Bartimaeus' town, they may be friends and family, we don't really know. What we do know is that they were also trying to follow this Jesus on the way. They had seen what Bartimaeus was healed to see. They were searching for meaning, searching for direction, searching for healing themselves on that road to Jerusalem.

And Bartimaeus, having received his healing – and here the scripture infers that Bartimaeus' healing is not only physical but spiritual because Jesus says to him “your faith has made you well” - joins them.

What then happened? How does Bartimaeus engage with the people? How does he see them? Well, we have to move to Matthew – because this story appears in the Gospel of Matthew too – so we move there briefly for insight as Mark – a man of fewer words than all the other Gospels, doesn't tell us. But in Matthew, Bartimaeus couldn't contain himself – he went and spread the news of the healing to everyone they met and gave them the gift of knowing about the Christ.

It occurs to me that Jesus didn't demand anything of Bartimaeus before he healed his sight. It occurs to me that Bartimaeus just came, in all his need and hope – but also in all his humanity – to be seen by Jesus as he was. To offer who and what he was for God's healing. Without qualification, without artifice, without dishonesty. Just as he was.

I reckon that's how God sees us too: in all our inconsistencies, all our small cruelties, our assumed self-righteousness, all our dark corners, all our big mistakes, all our works of daily unfaithfulness, and still, in the face of all that – God loves us.

Then I suppose that means that God's love for us is unconditional. That means that we can't earn it, deserve it, buy it, sell it, commodify it in any way. It isn't something we can lobby for, it isn't something we can manipulate. We can't use it for profit. It's a gift. That fundamental thought is, if you think about it – really think about it – life altering. It should make us see ourselves differently – with compassion and gentleness.

And it's in that sometimes inexplicable but generous love and healing that Bartimaeus experienced that we come to know the face of God - for Jesus came to show us what God's love looks and feels like.

So it seems to me that the way we see others needs to be predicated on the same things, the same gifts: Love, forgiveness, and generosity. It's a way of living that is a particular discipline. It's a tall order as we live our lives to do this and we cannot expect to do it perfectly. I know I certainly can't. But it is the orientation of our lives toward that goal that matters. God honours the trying. Because despite our success or failure, God loves us, as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. . . ."

A friend reminded me of this, recently. In response to his own struggles to live this way - with his heart oriented toward the Lord, He quoted from a beautiful newer translation of the Rule of St. Benedict which says this,

What is wanted is not that we should find ultimate truth,

Nor that we should become secure, nor that we should have ease

Nor that we should be without hurt; but that we should live fully.

Therefore we should not fear life, nor anything in life.

We should not fear death, nor anything in death. We should live our lives in love with life.

It is for us to train our hearts to live in grace, to sacrifice our self-centred desires, to find peace without want, without seeking it for ourselves, and when we fail, to begin again each day.

Always, we begin again. Supported, healed and strengthened by the Amazing Grace of God.

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