

Thursday 27 May 2020 – Zoom service

It was what Jesus's disciples really did not want. They had travelled with him on the long journey on foot from Galilee to Jerusalem, down the Jordan valley to where the road divides. And there they took the right fork though Jericho, where the road climbed steeply upwards, from Jericho 800 feet below sea level up to Jerusalem, high on its 2000 ft mountain ridge.

They had done their best to protect Jesus from the demands of the crowd, knowing that he would need all his energy as he faced in Jerusalem the final crisis of his ministry. They didn't understand it, but they knew it was bound to come and it wouldn't be good.

But their desire to protect was probably a lost cause. The crowds still flocked to him, to hear his teaching, to beg for his healing, just to encounter him. Recently it had been a group of importunate mothers bringing their children to be blessed. The disciples had tried to head them off, to give him the peace he needed, but to no avail. Jesus wouldn't have it. 'Let the children come to me, and don't prevent them.' And he took them up in his arms, as he always did, with no thought for his need to support himself.

And now they were in Jericho, the last stage, fifteen or so miles to Jerusalem, and once again it happened. A loud-mouthed blind beggar starts to shout out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.' They try to get him to be quiet, but Jesus has heard, and he inevitably responds. 'Call him here.' So, people encourage him to do as Jesus suggest, and he leaves the cloak, on which people would have placed their charitable coins—you don't need a cloak in Jericho for warmth—and he makes his way to Jesus. And Jesus asks what at first sight looks like the silliest question in the whole Bible. 'What do you want me to do for you?' It was only recently that two of his disciples, James and John, had said what they wanted, to sit on either side of Jesus in his kingdom, but Bartimaeus the beggar has no such grandiose ideas. It must have been obvious what he wanted but he says it all the same. 'My teacher, let me see again.' But it wasn't as silly a question as it might appear at first sight. If Jesus heals him, as of course he can, Bartimaeus has lost his living. No longer can he sit there every day, receiving the charitable gifts of the passers-by, helped by his family and friends. Healed, he must take responsibility for his own life, he must earn his own living. 'Beware of what you ask for,' goes the advice, 'you may receive it.' Jesus wants to know that Bartimaeus has thought it through.

And he has. He has recognised Jesus, naming him 'Son of David', a Messianic title. Up to this point, most of those who recognise who Jesus really is have been the demons who he is casting out. Bartimaeus may be physically blind, but spiritually he can see. And Jesus knows this. He doesn't say: 'You need healing and I can give it. Your recognition of your physical need is why I have helped you.' No, he says 'Go your way, your faith has made you well.' And Bartimaeus gains his sight and he follows Jesus on the way, not just on the road Jesus will take, but on the way which was what Jesus's first followers called the Christian life. Bartimaeus becomes a committed follower who follows him up the road to Jerusalem and to whatever awaits him there.

What does the story say to those early Christians who heard Mark's Gospel, to us who hear it nearly 2000 years later? First, God seeks to help us, but he needs us to cooperate with him by identifying what we need. He gives us our freedom, and will not impose his help on us. Second, what we need is to see, not just physical sight, but the spiritual sight that recognises who Jesus is, the Jesus who said, 'I am the light.' And third, in the light of that sight, we need to follow him. We may not know where we are being led, it may not be what we expect, there is no guarantee it will be easy, but we will have the light to see the path and the power of the Spirit to enable us to walk it. That is our challenge, that is our privilege, that is our calling.