

Pentecost 22
24/10/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 126
Mark 10:46-52

Eyes wide shut

In a sentence

With Bartimaeus, we have need of our eyes being opened, to see that God sees – and loves – us.

As with all miracle stories in the Bible, so also with the healing of blind Bartimaeus: we should not be too distracted by the miracle itself. Even if things happened exactly the way in which they are told in the gospel, the story is not *told* simply that we might believe that Jesus once healed a blind man. Today's reading asks not whether we believe Jesus once brought sight to a blind man but whether we see clearly ourselves.

This is the second healing of a blind man in Mark's gospel. In both cases, the healing takes place just before a revelation of Jesus' hidden identity. The miracles are not simply about seeing; they are about seeing *Jesus*.

Immediately following the first healing of a blind man (Mark 8.18ff), we hear Jesus declared to be God's anointed king (Messiah-Christ) and then of the qualification of this kingship by the cross. Immediately following today's story of Bartimaeus, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a traditional way in which Israel's king would enter the city (cf. Zechariah 9.9). This sign of kingship will be qualified now not by the prediction of the cross but its realisation. Eyes are opened to see a king, if, strangely, a crucified one.

Kings are as foreign to us today as are the miracles of the Gospels, but the king is just a contemporary sign Mark uses to identify Jesus. Bartimaeus cries out and his sight is restored, and what he sees is *Jesus*. The text's question to us, then, is not whether we can believe that Jesus could fix a blind person's eyes but, Are we blind to Jesus?

This is not an easy question to answer, for implicit here is that if we don't see Jesus, then we don't see *ourselves* properly. This is then a strange blindness: *we might not know that we are blind*.

The possibility of not knowing we are blind is not simply a 'religious' proposal. In our social discourse today, there are raging outings of blindness – of those blind to their own violence, privilege, cultural appropriation, racism, or whatever. We seek to unveil what is hidden, what has been blended into the background and so is overlooked. Or we seek to resist its unveiling.

In this political opening of eyes, however, there is deep accusation. We shake each other awake: 'Can't you *see*?' It is our guilt we are to see: the effects of our blindness on others.

With Bartimaeus, however, there is no *accusation*. If Bartimaeus had his eyes opened, the healing is an answer to the problem he knew he had but was not his fault. Even if we wonder whether such a thing could happen, we understand *what* would be happening if it did. An honest answer is given to an honest question.

If the story is about our blindness to our blindness, things are different. Now the healing *reveals* the problem: that we have been living with our eyes wide shut. A serious question is put to what where our certain answers. Yet, there is still no accusation here, no guilt. Miracle stories are about what we cannot do for ourselves, and this is no less the case when the miracles are metaphors: it takes God's healing power to reveal this kind of blindness, too.

And the healing is not a one-off. To have our eyes opened – to see something of God and ourselves in Jesus – is not the end of the matter. Bartimaeus does a strange thing when his eyes are opened. Instead of running home to see his family for the first time in years(?) or anything else a just-re-sighted person might do, he 'follows Jesus on the way'.

To have our eyes opened to our blindness is to learn that we do not know when we are blind. If seeing is first seeing Jesus, then keeping Jesus close – *following* Jesus – is the way to see clearly who we are and what is happening around us.

Of course, this is not merely 'looking' at Jesus. Religious adoration is not the point, at least not here. To see Jesus is to see him seeing me, affirming what I can become, whoever and wherever I am. Having our eyes opened will mean different things for each of us. The rich and the poor are blind in this way, but differently so, and seeing will mean different things. And so also for the young and the old; for the parent and the child; the wife and the husband; the white and the black.

We all know that we don't know, can see that we can't see, and it is usually the case that there is nothing we are able to do about it but act in ignorance, step out blindly, and see what happens. And this delivers us the world we live in today.

The cry of those who find themselves in these circumstances is not different from that of Bartimaeus. We need to see more clearly: Son of God, have mercy on me. See me, that I might see.

Our story today assures us: God does see us, and gives us a vision of ourselves through God's own eyes, that we might begin to walk God's way.

This is the beginning of our healing, our waking up, our being made new.

May Bartimaeus' prayer for healing be ours, that God might heal us.
