

Pentecost 22
28/10/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Job 42:1-6,
Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

Let me see again... awakened to renewed discipleship

The metaphor of blindness is widely used in the history of religion. For some it represents ignorance of the real state of things or the denial of the obvious. Others regard the blind as those who ignore the deceitful pretences of this world and are therefore privileged to know its secret reality, too deeply buried to be discerned by ordinary mortals. This leads into a strong tradition that the blind share knowledge of God: they see with different eyes and are able to discern deeper contours of reality normally only understood in faith and trust. That is why Prophets are sometimes depicted as blind: their eyes closed to physical light in order for them to perceive the light of God. Similarly those who have received inspired insight - poets, wonder workers, 'seers', bards and troubadours - are often depicted as blind, as are the elderly, symbolizing the wise insight of age. However Moses, who "saw God face to face," lived to a great age with his "sight undimmed". Paul was made blind in his encounter with God and then had his sight restored. One of the key features of Jesus' ministry was that he brought recovery of sight to the blind, something that often has a metaphorical reference to being awakened to spiritual truth.

Mark's story about Bartimaeus is the last in a long series of teaching events that immediately precedes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The Journey to Jerusalem began earlier with another story of the healing of a blind man. Some say this teaching series is like a catechism, created to enable people to see the spiritual truth of what it means to follow Jesus.

The two blind men are first of all men who, despite their disability, and marginalisation, are able recognise and understand Jesus. This is in stark contrast to the twelve disciples who on the journey to Jerusalem had the advantage of standing at the centre, and yet were repeatedly unable to grasp or emulate the kind of ministry that was being embodied before their eyes. They clung to their delusions of grandeur and vain hopes for what the future was going to deliver to them.

It is noticeable that in the Gospels there are no stories of blind women being healed. Instead we find women were present when Jesus went to the cross, and were there first on Easter Day. The women see and stay with what takes place, and come to have places of leadership in the new Messianic community.

When Jesus approached Jerusalem Bartimeus addressed him with the Messianic title: "Son of David". As Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the Davidic King [Mark 11:10], and days later he hangs on the cross as "The King of the Jews". Bartimeus' use of "Son of David" was significant, and for the first time Jesus did not try to silence the one who declared who he was.

In contrast the crowds tried to keep Bartimaeus in his place: marginalised on the side of the road, a beggar with his cloak on the ground, hoping for a few coins. The attempt at suppression had the opposite effect: he cried out again and Jesus stood still.

We should ponder this stance. Addressed in Messianic terms, Jesus stopped and called for the man to come in from the margins and asked: “What do you want me to do for you?” It is the same question as when James and John came asking for positions of power and authority in the new regime of God, but the answer is different: “My teacher let me see again”. Bartimaeus’ words put him in the stance of being a learner: a disciple of “the Son of David”. He who had every reason not to understand, and even to feel cheated by life, and by God, comprehended perfectly. His use of “Son of David” revealed he had faith and it “made him well”. His ability to perceive the real nature of Jesus had united him with the vibrant presence of the Living God. And he was set free to follow Jesus “on the way”. What came next was the toughest part of the journey that exposed the real nature of the Messianic mission, and it would have called for all the spiritual insight Bartimaeus could muster.

Knowing and not knowing, seeing and not seeing, the Bible is full of stories like this. We have become familiar with a vision of life that leaves God out of the equation and even marginalizes symbolic discourse. We prefer to trust the things that can be weighed, measured and calculated, and there is little room for the surprising, the unexplainable, or being grasped by something beyond ourselves. As a consequence the stories of faith so familiar to us here are often relegated to the scrap heap of history along with disused myths and symbols. But talk of seeing and not seeing and of the restoration of sight introduces us to the idea that there may be underlying contours of life that are not part of our normal view of reality and yet may move into our sphere of perception.

In a context that can be confusing and misleading for people of faith, our own prayer might well become that of Bartimaeus: “Lord, let me see again”. Perhaps that is a prayer for people of faith to pray often. This prayer is not meant simply to yield us further spiritual insight so that we feel better. It is intended to enable us to see what we need, in order to emulate Bartimaeus and “follow Jesus on the way”. It is for engaging in discipleship, and for renewing discipleship: our service of Christ in the world.

This is Reformation Day. When we were in the Church, you may remember that for a few years we thought in turn about each of the four Reformers in the window. One of the precepts that came from the Reformation was that the church would be “always reforming”: always being renewed by the call of Christ to engage afresh with discipleship in fresh words and deeds.

On this day 8 years ago we were celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the foundation of this congregation. On that occasion the topic of the Sermon was: “A City not forsaken, a city with a heart of life” and included the following story. Timothy Radcliffe, a leading Dominican Friar, had recently been in town. While Provincial of that order he visited Dominican communities all over the world, and was in Burundi when the Tutsis and Hutus were engaged in destructive conflict. The country he travelled through was dangerous, blackened and ruined, but suddenly a green hill came in view. On that hill lived a religious community of twelve women, 6 Tutsis and 6 Hutus, themselves a living sign of reconciliation. He asked how they managed to be such a sign. They said they prayed together, and they listened to the news together, to accompany each other in their grief. The community had become a place of peace in a sea of darkness, a sacramental sign of hope in a dead environment. Their life of prayer together had literally greened the countryside as others, finding it a place of peace, came to live there and plant their gardens.

Last week we approved the financial plan for the development of the North Melbourne Uniting Church Centre. The idea grew from dreams like this, that this church and its congregation might become such a source of life for this city: a centre for liturgy and mission.

There are many things that lead people of faith to doubt the church has a future. As we leave our reflection on seeing and not seeing, we must not miss the fact that at the end of Mark’s Gospel the man in white tells the women not to be alarmed: Jesus has been raised, and has gone ahead of them into Galilee, the place of his ministry and of their discipleship, and they will see him there, just as he promised [Mk 16:7]. The church has a future, not because of what we do, but because of the promised presence of God with us.

As we gather week by week to hear the Gospel and share the sacrament, may our prayer continue to be: “Lord let me see again” that we may be constantly reawakened to the call to discipleship, and have the spiritual insight and resources to express in word and deed the hope in which we live.
