

Proper 25, October 28, 2012. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Jericho – a city of legend. Remember “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho”? And? “The walls came a tumbling down!!” Well, irrespective of that fanciful story, Jericho’s still an amazing place! 20 miles east of Jerusalem, 1,000 feet below sea level, five miles from the Jordan river, with a natural spring at it’s heart - verdant and fruitful, with a moderate winter temperature, making it a great place for a winter palace – that’s what Herod the Great thought, too! Those of us who were there in 2008 thought so too – a beautiful place!

The Jericho of Jesus’ time was also a city of great beauty, and a hub – the main road from the north, and the main road up – 3,000 feet – to Jerusalem both passed through its center. That latter road – up to Jerusalem – was a desolate and notoriously unsafe pathway, as the story of the Good Samaritan reminds us [Luke 10:30ff.]. Still, it was heavily traveled, because it was the only way to Jerusalem from the east or north that didn’t involve passing through hostile areas. So if you went on a pilgrimage to a great feast, this was the road you used: south from the Galilee, then west, to Jerusalem.

Today’s passage is part of exactly that journey because Jesus was going from the Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Now when a distinguished Rabbi or teacher was on such a journey it was the custom that he was surrounded by a crowd of people, disciples and learners, who listened to him as teach and debate as he walked. That was one of the commonest ways of teaching, which partly explains why there was such a big crowd present as Jesus went through Jericho.

But there were other reasons that the crowd was so big. It was the law that every male Jew over twelve years of age had to attend the Passover (Exod 34:23). It was impossible that such a law should be fulfilled and that every man should go. So those who were unable to go got into the habit of lining the streets of towns and villages through which groups of Passover pilgrims must pass to bid them godspeed on their way. That explains the crowd on the road-side.

Added to that were the several thousand priests who served in the Temple at Jerusalem but lived in Jericho. Every one of them served during Passover on a staggered basis. Some would thus have been going up to Jerusalem at the same time as Jesus, others would have been waiting to go and probably also lined the streets watching the seemingly endless procession.

Few, if any, would have known that Jesus was among the crowd walking toward the Temple. But apparently at some stage his fame – or notoriety – had passed through the crowd.

And then a blind man – Bartimaeus – enters the story.

Who was he? Probably a “nobody” – a regular who sat with other beggars at the city gate, day after day, begging. And this was Passover season – like Christmas & Easter rolled into one – people were more generous – as long as you knew your place and weren’t too pushy. Just sit there, try and look pitiful, and beg.

And then the crowd begins to murmur: “it’s that healer – you know – Jesus – from the Galilee”

What do you do if you need healing and then a famous healer comes by? And he can’t see you? You start yelling! You ignore those trying to “shush” you. Who cares if you upset a few folk!

There are times in our lives when we know that we have to say something, and no one is going to keep us quiet, and it was just such a moment for Bartimaeus, no one was going to silence him, and he made such a racket and a fuss that the procession stopped and he was brought to Jesus.

For Bartimaeus the world must have stopped for that moment.

Let’s take a step back for a moment. What have we heard Jesus talk about in the last few weeks? Discipleship. He’s pressed hard ideals, talked of cost and pain, and, in particular, a selfless living that surrenders a focus on possessions for a focus on love. AND we’ve seen the disciples fail to understand all the talk, and instead squabble about who would sit on his right and left hand in glory.

And now we stand with him and Bartimaeus in Jericho.

It’s clear that in this moment both Bartimaeus and Jesus stand at a cross-roads. There’s a depth to Bartimaeus that comes across in this encounter – he genuinely believed Jesus could help him – could heal him. And so, when Jesus asked: “what do you want me to do for you?” he immediately answered: “let me receive my sight.”

Compare that question with the one asked by James and John: “receive sight” vs. sitting in power at Jesus left and right hand.

After putting down the disciples’ childish squabbling, after talking about the dangers of discipleship and not having them listen, this simple, straightforward request must have touched Jesus very deeply.

And so Jesus replies: “go your way, your faith has made you whole”. And Bartimaeus way is now literally clear, he can see, and **there is only one way he can now go.**

He follows Jesus.

Our story draws to its close. I find it striking that rather than closing his public ministry with profound teaching, great and mighty statements of faith, its with a simple act of kindness toward a beggar who had made up his mind to reach out to Jesus.

This encounter is that last which records the story of a healing before the tumultuous events of the Passover. It’s a simple, short story. Yet among the first Christians, this was one of the most loved stories about Jesus, and was told again and again, because it illustrates in simple and moving terms what life – and discipleship – is all about.

Life for many of us can often feel like we're journeying along blindfolded. Unexpected problems, strange twists of fate, things which we feel are unjustified, a world that's often confusing and almost always arbitrary: all of them can make us feel like we're blind to what's really going on around us. The story of Bartimaeus calls us to make a positive commitment to God, a commitment of the heart which is based on prayerful reflection; a commitment of faith that's eager to respond, and lives out of the love that God has put in all our hearts.

Understanding isn't a requirement- it certainly wasn't for Bartimaeus. All that matters is the committed response of a faithful heart. That's the story of the gospels, all of them, that the glory and the triumph of Jesus end and begin on the road to Jerusalem – to the final desolation of the cross – with healing. **That's our story if we claim it.**

So this story offers us hope. When we are confronted with all of the complexities of living, with all the struggling, with the pain, we can, with Bartimaeus, find the real light in the midst of the darkest darkness. All it requires is a faithful heart, and the strength to ask for God's grace.