

I look around our little flock today and think “What could enable us to grow? What would cause people to want to come and be among us and to worship God with us?”

Today we are going to look at a healing of a blind man by the name of Bartimaeus. If God was healing like Jesus healed back then wouldn't that be something that people might come to experience? Would Jesus working among us like that draw people here? Would that bring others to worship him too? So let's explore this healing and see if we can work out what was involved then that might open up the possibility of that sort of thing happening now too.

This healing occurs just outside Jericho while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will go through his death and resurrection as he has predicted for the third time in Mark 10:32-34. The healing comes just after James and John have asked for the positions of glory in Jesus' Kingdom and he has had to explain once again the reversal of status in God's Kingdom, that to be the greatest in his Kingdom one must be everyone's slave.

Jericho is considered to be the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth. When I was there I learned that archeologists have identified 23 layers of civilization at Tell Jericho - the mound built up by all the layers of city built there.

Jericho is 258 meters below sea-level which makes it extra hot. For a foot traveller such as Jesus this was his lowest point on his journey to Jerusalem. He had walked down the Jordan valley from the region of Samaria. From here he would begin a 1000 meter climb to Jerusalem at 750 meters above sea-level. At Jericho there are springs of abundant water which is the reason it has been settled there for 12,000 years.

Jesus is accompanied by a large crowd as well as his disciples when Bartimaeus calls out. He is a blind beggar. Remember Jesus had healed another blind man in John 9 and the question had been asked about whether the man's or his parent's sin was the cause of his blindness. In other words blindness was considered to be a result of sin. So Bartimaeus was not just poor due to his inability to work as a blind man but also regarded as a sinner. So he was the lowest of the low in their society.

But he had heard of Jesus and made up his mind about him. The term Son of David referred to Jesus being King and the one through whom God's kingdom would come – the anointed one – the Messiah or Christ. That is who Bartimaeus had worked out Jesus to be. And so he calls out 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'. Many in the crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet. They obviously didn't think that he, as the lowliest of the low, had the same right to be seen by Jesus as they did! Also the term 'Son of David' with its kingly association was a rather dangerous title to be yelling out. In occupied Israel only the Roman emperor or their appointed person was allowed to be king. Some in the crowd could well have been worried about that claim being shouted out – someone in authority could get alarmed. But

Bartimaeus was determined. He kept on shouting, louder and louder. And Jesus heard him and stopped.

Then Jesus turns to those in the crowd around him, even those who had been rebuking Bartimaeus, and asks them to call Bartimaeus to where he was. They do as Jesus asks. So Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, leaps up and comes to Jesus. His cloak is likely to be his only real possession of value. But he wouldn't have been wearing it then. Jericho is far too hot for that during the day. It was what kept him warm at night when he had little other shelter. What he would have done during the day is spread his cloak in front to him for people to throw their coins on. Then he would have been able to find the coins by gathering up the cloak. So when he flung off his cloak he was not only letting go of his possession but also any money he might have collected and the ability to keep warm at night or gather coins in the future. He was trusting absolutely in Jesus for his future.

Then Jesus asks him 'What do you want me to do for you?'. Do you, Bartimaeus, want to give up begging? Do you want to live differently, to work for a living, to have no reason to sit by the roadside all day whining at passers-by like so many beggars do even today? It is quite a challenge and Bartimaeus rises to it splendidly.

Bartimaeus addresses him as Rabboni – my teacher (or really great one I look up to for life's instruction) – rather than just teacher – rabbi – another sign of his total trust in Jesus. And he says – let me see again. He asks for his sight to be restored, not just a physical ask but a spiritual one as they would have understood it – for his sins to be forgiven too. And Jesus heals him with the phrase he has often used – your faith has made you well.

Mark is quite clear. Bartimaeus is a model to imitate. Unlike the rich young man who asked for eternal life, or the disciples who asked for prestige, power, glory, Bartimaeus asked for what he needed, a new life and what would enable him to follow Jesus. Unlike the disciples, who hadn't really understood what Jesus was about, he is already a man of faith, courage and true discipleship. So he follows Jesus on the way. The 'way' was the early Christian word for Christianity. He must have been known to the early church, part of it, as he is referred to by his name.

The other significant feature of this healing is that it is the second specifically described healing of a blind man in Mark and has a special meaning. Both healings point to eyes being opened not just physically but in terms of insight as well, of really seeing who Jesus was and what he was about. The first healing came with the disciples realizing who Jesus was as the Messiah. This second is pointing to the realization of Jesus being the one who would give his life to bring salvation to all. When Jesus says – your faith has saved you – saved is not just about physical healing but carries the wider and deeper meaning of spiritual healing and being made whole in every aspect of life.

Now to us and what we can apply to ourselves from this passage.

First of all, remember that healing here was the restoration not only of sight for Bartimaeus but also of his social and spiritual standing. Real healing brings complete wholeness, life transformation, the ability and desire to follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

Do we want to see that sort of healing and transformation happen for people in and through our church? What might that require of us?

- It requires that we want this also for the least among us in our society like Bartimaeus. We would see those who are most excluded from pure or polite society as at least as worthy of Jesus' attention as ourselves. We would welcome these among us in our services and groups as these are people Jesus wants to touch.
- If we want to see healing then we need to be listening to Jesus call to bring those who need healing, who are crying out for healing to him. If someone shares their sorrows, their need, their sickness, their pain, with you will you bring them then and there to Jesus, pray simply for them right then? Or do you have some excuse not to?
- We would not silence the truth that might be dangerous, the truth that our society would say is not politically correct. Today that is getting clearer and clearer. If we want to see healing and wholeness come to people we have to be able to name what is pathological in our society. Frankly - God doesn't want to only heal physical or mental sickness. God wants to heal sexual sickness as well. God wants to heal the sinfulness in our very identity in every one of us. None of us is 'all OK'. You're OK and I'm OK – no way!

If we want to see healing in our church we need to be open to being healed ourselves. Each of us may not have a physical ailment but we all have something that we know is standing in the way of being the people we believe God wants us to be and made us to be. What does the healing of Bartimaeus and especially his behavior show us about being healed.

- We need to recognize who Jesus is, to open our eyes to the wonder and the challenge he presents us with.
- We need to be prepared to speak out that truth, even when it might make us feel socially uncomfortable or be embarrassing. Can we speak out truth about Jesus, how we trust him and why, who he is to us. If we can't openly acknowledge him do we really believe he can heal us in a way that we would witness to others about. If we won't be able to witness to his transformation of our lives then such transformation would have no influence on our church life or beyond.
- We may need to throw off what we rely upon instead of becoming whole. Eg if we are sick or needy in some way we can become used to being cared for, being a victim of our sickness or brokenness, and not really want to step out from under that care. We need to let go of the small selfish comforts of victimhood, the excuses we have for not really stepping out and following Jesus, the weaknesses that we are used to catering for in ourselves, just as Bartimaeus needed to throw away his cloak and begging lifestyle to be ready to follow Jesus as a whole transformed disciple.
- We need to focus on what is really needed for us to be whole. Are our attention and prayers for ourselves focused on blessings, our rewards in life now and in the future,

on our own power, material or spiritual, our own position or reputation. These are not necessary for us to be faithful disciples. What is needed is our continuing transformation into wholeness, into the person who God created us to be, able to humbly, faithfully and more closely follow Jesus.

- Finally it is our faith that will save us too, our trust in Jesus for every aspect of our living and being. Then we can follow him wherever he may lead us and witness to him in our church and in the world.

So are we ready to see God so at work among us, healing, transforming, restoring lives in such a way that this church can grow, that people will want to join us in praising and worshipping God for what he is doing among us? Do we want to see Jesus healing now? Let's examine our hearts before him and consider our willingness to put our trust in the one who heals.