

see-ing
a sermon preached on the
twenty-second sunday after Pentecost
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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The Lections: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126, Hebrews 7:21-28; Mark 10:46-52

Today's gospel story is the climax of the journey-to-Jerusalem narrative: Jericho is just a short distance from Jesus' objective. Late in the liturgical year, with All Saints day almost upon us, the lectionary brings us today to the doorstep of Jerusalem. Everything Jesus has been teaching them is to be embodied in the experience of Jerusalem.¹

The essential point of the blind Bartimaeus encounter is sufficiently self-evident that it requires little explanation: Jesus has been teaching his disciples about Messiah: they have recognised that he is indeed the long-awaited Messiah;² but they have completely misunderstood what being 'Messiah' means even though he has taught them and shown them its content and values;³ yet they have consistently remained blind,⁴ remaining trapped in hierarchicalism, rivalry, self-centredness, and a legal-moralising straightjacketed religion. Religious rule-keepers and purity-guardians remain stuck in their feudal blindness.⁵ Disciples who have seen so much, remain without sight.⁶ The wealthy and powerful remain fixated on their own self-interest.⁷

And yet, here on the doorstep of Jerusalem, a poor and outcast man – 'outcast' because unclean – a 'blind Bartimaeus' sees! Insiders fail to see: the outsider sees!

This is the true miracle – which religious historicising, institutionalising, biblicising and superficial piety relentlessly mask. Those who supposedly see, do not. One who is apparently blind, sees! In his declaration, "Jesus, Son of David",⁸ 'Blind' Bartimaeus articulates a vision which remains unseen by disciples and religious rule-keepers alike. That is indeed miracle.

Jesus tells Bartimaeus that his "faith has made [him] well".⁹ What is the meaning of 'faith' in this declaration? Does it mean believing in impossible propositions, as blind and legalising religion is inclined to insist? The fact that Bartimaeus already saw what the disciples and religious rule-keepers did not should alert us to the gospel's astonishing *evangelion*: 'Faith' and sight are inextricably linked. The one who has 'faith' sees. Those who claim to see in fact have no faith.

The poet William Blake wrote:¹⁰ "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." Blake names the same truth Jesus expressed earlier in Mark's gospel: in explaining his reason for speaking in parables, Jesus tells disciples that there are those who "indeed look, but [do] not perceive".¹¹

Not only are 'faith' and sight inextricably linked. The capacity to be truly human – to apprehend 'the infinite', to truly understand who we are, whose we are, where we belong, and what we are for – depends on sight, on the capacity to see. The doors of perception to the infinite are open in 'blind' Bartimaeus: while the religious rule-keepers and disciples remain closed up, in narrow-chinked caverns.

In the prologue to *The Phenomenon of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Seeing. One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing – if not ultimately, at least essentially... Unity grows... only if it is supported by an increase in consciousness, of vision... To try to see more and to see better is not, therefore, just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury. See or perish."¹² Consciousness is a function of sight. And consciousness is the human vocation – the reason why it would constitute moral as well as existential failure to not look and

¹ Mark 10:32

² Mark 8:29

³ Mark 8:30, 33-37

⁴ Mark 9:19, 34-37

⁵ Mark 9:2

⁶ Mark 9:2-8

⁷ Mark 9:17

⁸ Mark 10:47

⁹ Mark 10:52

¹⁰ William Blake, cited in John V Taylor, *The Christlike God*, London: SCM, 1992, p32.

¹¹ Mark 4:12

¹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, (A New Edition and Translation of *Le phenomene humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber), Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999, p3.

search that we might see. We do not yet see the infinite, our religious, economic, political, and tribal caverns preventing us. The Divine Being's incarnation is astonishingly revealed in visions of the diaphony of nature; the mystery of the stars; the mystery of not just atoms but infinitesimally miniscule sub-atomic particles; the mystery of the human psyche. The creation becoming conscious of itself, indeed, in the rise of human consciousness.

This is *see-ing*! And it's neither a luxury nor an option.

For our religion in this era to have any chance of galvanising the creative energies of humankind, it will be essential that the 'high priesthood' of Christ – as articulated by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews¹³ – be reimagined, as an Ancient Near Eastern way of contrasting the wilful refusal to come out of our narrow religious caverns, into the dazzling light of consciousness as manifest in the One whose life transcends death.

'Blind' Bartimaeus is a living parable of the mystery of God's ongoing creation in human consciousness. Whereas religious rule-keepers and disciples alike remain stuck in their dim moralising, self-justifying and rivalrous caverns – viewing the creation through narrow chinks – Bartimaeus sees. Whereas they are unconscious, consciousness is rising in him. Consciousness reveals the truth about Messiahship – the truth about discipleship, the truth about becoming fully human - and makes possible going with Jesus 'on the way',¹⁴ embodying his priesthood.

We gather at the Altar-Table of Christ in order that we might see – that we might increasingly come to consciousness, that we might emerge from the narrow cavern of our religion, that we might truly embody his priesthood, becoming the Body of Christ. In receiving Christ's Body and Blood we are both receiving and offering – we are to become ourselves what we eat. We see in the sacred elements and in each other that true Messiahship is to be enfleshed in us – in all humankind: to see ourselves as living manifestations of the astonishing Paschal Mystery good news, of the Divine Holy Mystery becoming conscious by the counter-cultural means of life-through-dying.

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¹³ Hebrews 7:23-28

¹⁴ Mark 10:52