

“Let him be heard” a sermon based on Job 42:1-6, 10-17 and Mark 10:46-52 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 24 October 2021 (Presbyterian Support Sunday).

Sometimes an organisation needs to step back and reconsider what it is doing and why. Over the last year or so, Presbyterian Support Otago has been doing that. I serve on the Board of Support. One aspect of our review involved reflecting on how we relate to the people who come to us. That led to the sentence in our mission statement “We walk with people across the generations to create together places to live, learn and thrive.” If we wanted two stories to epitomise what that sentence meant, one would be the story of Bartimaeus and the other would be the parable of Job. We walk with people.

The Bartimaeus story comes at the end of part one of the two parts of the gospel of Mark. The next verse begins part two which is the story of Jesus in Jerusalem – his entry through the gates, his trial and his crucifixion. This story about a blind person receiving sight is the last or second to last story of part one of each of the synoptic gospels – Matthew Mark and Luke. It is a conclusion to the stories we have heard almost since Easter. As a conclusion, it describes an exemplary disciple or follower of Jesus. It contains elements that we have heard in earlier stories but Bartimaeus makes a more faithful response compared to others.

Let’s look more closely. The blind beggar has a name and he makes his own response. He is part of a family, the son of Timaeus. People are always more than what we imagine they might need. They are not a dysfunction or a disability or a need or less fortunate. They have a name and they have gifts and strengths. And their family is affected by what they want to talk about or deal with. They are the son or daughter of Timaeus.

And they have a voice, a voice they may not always know how to use, or a voice that has been disregarded or down-played or silenced. The crowd tells Bartimaeus to be quiet. They see him as a blind beggar who sits beside the road – they have got used to him – this is how the world is. A blind beggar with a cloak laid out in front of him to collect whatever money people would throw on it. A blind beggar used to dust and dark and being sidelined. A blind beggar who must have sinned or done something wrong to have ended up like that, because at one stage he had been able to see. So the crowd tell him to be quiet. Bartimaeus must have experienced that many times. But in the presence of Jesus he is someone, he finds his voice and he uses it to cry out.

Then Jesus stands still ... How tempted they were to keep walking - they have a goal in mind - Jerusalem. They were journeying from Jericho to Jerusalem, having set their face to what was to happen there. So there was an intensity and a purpose in their walking that day – they could rightly have resisted interruption. Yet, amid a jostling crowd and chattering disciples, Jesus hears a blind beggar sitting on the side of the road and he stands still ... he stands still.

Then Jesus tells the crowd to call Bartimaeus to him. Jesus draws people from the edge where we put them with labels and stereotypes and categories because drawing people from the edge is what Jesus does. Having been affirmed in who he is, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak.

The cloak represented his livelihood. It's what he laid on the side of the road for people to throw their money on. 25 verses earlier, a rich man had gone away grieving because he did not give up what he owned. But here was a beggar, whose life was being affirmed, able to see possibilities, so he threw off the cloak.

And then came the question for us, for all – What do you want me to do for you? What is your most heart-felt longing? Jesus had asked James and John the same question in the previous story and they had asked for status and power. Bartimaeus was more perceptive, more seeing. What do we really want is a tough question. It drills down to what we want to live for. What is our deepest yearning, our most earnest longing? It is what Support helps people to explore.

And at the end, Jesus affirms that Bartimaeus already has what he needs in order to see. Your faith has made you well, Jesus says. And Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way, the way that brings life to others and to himself. The point of all the stories we have heard in the first part of Mark is so people will be affirmed, accepted and included that they/we walk the way of Christ, our eyes open to all the people on the side of the road. Bartimaeus was repeatedly affirmed – he was named, he was connected with his family, he was encouraged to cry out and he was heard. Being affirmed, he was able courageously to put aside what had been, to say what he needed, to follow a way that brought life. It is a story about how God is **with** people.

The parable of Job offers similar wisdom, that God is with Job in his questioning, helping him see possibilities that had been there but which Job had missed because people told him that God would do things for him.

Eventually Job turned from understanding life contractually, from understanding God contractually – “If I do this then you God are obligated to do that.” “If I am good, you will bless me.” God offers companionship not a contract - “We walk with people across the generations to create together places to live, learn and thrive.” And the second part of the gospels portrays a God who walks with people even to the point of death.

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