

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126 (125); Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed him on the way

Mark 10:46 They came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 49 Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” 52 Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The story of Bartimaeus, apparently incidental, forms an important part of Mark’s teaching on discipleship. Firstly, it constitutes the closing of the discipleship section. This started in Mark 8:22-26, with the story of the man who recovers his sight in two stages and closes here with the story of another blind man. In between, the teaching on discipleship is not understood by the disciples because they have not yet understood what kind of Messiah Jesus is to be. In a word, the disciples are blind and stand in need of (double) healing. This is the first public acclamation of Jesus as Messiah and an important moment after the confession at Caesarea Philippi in Mk 8:27.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a short story, an anecdote. It is significant in itself and also has a special role in Mark’s teaching on discipleship. The blind man is asked to declare what he wants Jesus to do for him. Unlike James and John, whose response to the same question is further glory for them-

selves, the blind man requests “again sight”, that is, the deeper *insight* of faith.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The author may also have in mind the return of David to Jerusalem as recounted in 2 Samuel 19:31-20:3 (not all the details fit the Messiah!).

Blindness (darkness) is used a good deal in Isaiah as a metaphor:

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them. They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—those who trust in carved images, who say to cast images, “You are our gods.” Listen, you that are deaf; and you that are blind, look up and see! (Isaiah 42:16-18)



NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he

Thought for the day

The journey towards faith has many dimensions. *Firstly*, there is our need (expressed in the Gospel as blindness). *Secondly*, the courage to name our need, even in the face of opposition. *Next* comes our encounter with Jesus and our cry for help, guidance, healing. Naming our need is insisted upon by Jesus as an essential step, because faith is so much more than believing lots of doctrines. More fundamentally, it is an act of trust, a putting of myself in relationship and being able to receive from God whatever it is we need. This is the faith which makes us well.

Prayer

God, our light and hope, be our guide on the path of life and on the way of faith. Help us to be aware of our blindness, especially when we think we can see. With your healing touch, may we be filled with light and joy. Amen.

asked him, “Can you see anything?” And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.” (Mark 8:22-26)

(ii) David is mentioned regularly throughout the NT (Matt 1:1, 6, 17, 20; 9:27; 12:3, 23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42-43, 45; Mark 2:25; 10:47-48; 11:10; 12:35-37; Luke 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11; 3:31; 6:3; 18:38-39; 20:42, 44; John 7:42; Acts 1:16; 2:25, 29, 31, 34; 4:25; 7:45; 13:22, 34, 36; 15:16; Rom 1:3; 4:6; 11:9; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 4:7; 11:32; Rev 3:7; 5:5; 22:16). Messianic hopes had become focused on a restoration of the golden age of David’s kingdom.

(iii) The author may have in mind the others scenes in Mark which mention David, all of which show Jesus in relation to David and/or superior to David.

And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his

companions were hungry and in need of food? (Mark 2:25)

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:10)

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?” And the large crowd was listening to him with delight. (Mark 12:35–37)

ST PAUL

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1Thessalonians 5:4–8)

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Corinthians 4:4–6)

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:11–14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 46 Jericho was the last stop on the pilgrim route to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is strategically placed to attract



alms from pilgrims close to the holy city. “Bartimaeus” is not a proper name but means, as indicated, “son of Timaeus”. It is very unusual to have the name of someone who was cured and perhaps here we are to think of a figure, who was later well-known as a fully-fledged disciple (cf. Mark 15:22). The word “way” has a special force in Mark and the literal original of “by the roadside” is “alongside the way” i.e. of discipleship.

Verse 47 The full expression, Jesus of Nazareth, is found only three times in Mark (Mark 1:24; 10:47; 16:6) on the lips respectively of a demon, Bartimaeus and an angel. The blind man is in unusual company! Bartimaeus recognises Jesus as Messiah by calling him Son of David. The only other mention of mercy in Mark is the account of an exorcism (But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” [Mark 5:19])

Verse 48 To be quiet is also found in elsewhere in Mark: Mark 3:4; 4:39; 9:34; 10:48; 14:61. Opposition serves only to give the blind man even more courage.

Verse 49 The only other use of “take heart” is found in “But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” (Mark 6:49–50) “Get up” is also the verb “to rise,” used of the resurrection.

Verse 50 The keenness is well conveyed in the verbs. It is sometimes thought that the outer cloak was essential for the task of begging and that throwing it off meant the beginnings of a change.

Verse 51 There is a very powerful, even painful, contrast with “James and John,

the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:35–36) The verb translated as “see again” means to “look up” more often in Mark (Mark 6:41; 7:34; 8:24; 10:51–52; 16:4).

Verse 52 This expression has been used before: “He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:34), The verb “make you well” means also “saved you” and Mark wants us to hear this second meaning. Unlike the disciples, the man “sees”, that is comes to faith and becomes a disciple, following Jesus on the Way (capital w!).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In this story Jesus cures the blind man, Bartimaeus. Recovery of sight in the Bible is often a metaphor for coming to faith. Perhaps during your life you have had moments of insight, of deeper understanding, of appreciating who Jesus is for you. What was it that helped you to see more clearly?
2. Who was the ‘Jesus person’ who helped you to see more clearly? Perhaps, as a parent, a teacher or a friend, you have also been a ‘Jesus person’ for another and helped her or him to a clearer understanding of the meaning of life, love and faith.
3. To get to Jesus, Bartimaeus threw aside his cloak so that he would not be impeded. What have you had to discard in order to be able to see more clearly (e.g., an assumption, a prejudice, a rigid opinion)?
4. “Your faith has saved you” Jesus said to Bartimaeus. Recall situations in which you have been grateful for the faith that is yours because in some way it saved you.

PRAYER

Have pity on us, God our saviour. Grant us grace and courage to cast off our sins and turn to you for healing.

Show us in Christ the sure path of salvation and strengthen us to follow gladly in the Way of the Gospel.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek

Heb. 5:1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; 3 and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. 4 And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; 6 as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Heb 5:7 *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.* 8 *Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;* 9 *and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,* 10 *having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Letter to the Hebrews inhabits a world very different from our own and excerpts, such as today’s, are hard to grasp in isolation from the whole argument and out of their cultural context. Nevertheless, it is worth struggling with it because buried in there is a teaching of great power and, I am convinced, of great relevance for today.

The writer is exploring “the great events that gave us new life in Christ.” Jesus is God’s greatest outreach to broken and fractured humanity. As a human being, he experienced everything that we do, including the destructiveness of an unjust death. Yet, by his faithfulness to God (expressed here as submission and obedience), Jesus stayed in a relationship of absolute trust towards God. This was the sacrifice—not of blood but of costly fidelity to his identity, call and mission.

KIND OF WRITING

The first part of the reading is a report on how one becomes a priest, probably widely available in the culture. The sec-

ond part is proof from Scripture, using Psalm 2:7 (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:34, Acts 13:13 and Heb 1:5) and Psalm 110 (Rom 11:29; Heb 5:6; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 17, 21). Both Psalms are used widely in the New Testament. Ps 110:4 has a special frequency in Hebrews.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

In many places, the writer depends on proof from Scripture citation, especially from the Psalms. He also assumes a familiarity with the process of becoming high priest. Clearly, he was writing to people—Jews and Gentiles—familiar with Bible as the word of God and with Jewish tradition.

RELATED PASSAGES

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed—namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus’ faithfulness. (Romans 3:21–26)

Why Melchizedek?

There are two reasons. First of all, his priesthood is assessed as superior to Levi’s. The ancestor of Levi, Abraham, did Melchizedek homage and, therefore, in the loins of his ancestor, so did Levi. Secondly, the birth and death of Melchizedek were mysterious, and likewise the origin of Jesus and the outcome of his death were in the hands of God.

And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed [Abram] and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him one tenth of everything. (Genesis

14:18–20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Thus, a priest is appointed by God. In Jesus’ case, the appointment is confirmed by the Messianic Psalms 2 and 110.

Verses 2-3 The usual high priest is also sympathetic; however, he needs also to offer sacrifice for his own sins. This is not the case with Jesus.

Verse 4 The teaching of v. 1 is repeated with the added example of Aaron. Aaron conjures up the Levitical priesthood, descended from him and also coming from God. However, the writer will go on to break the continuity with this priesthood in favour of Melchizedek’s, older and superior.

Verse 5 The Psalm citation captures Jesus appointment *as Messiah*, a messiah whose role will unexpectedly include suffering and death.

Verse 6 This verse introduces Melchizedek, for the first time. The contrasting priesthoods will make up the substance of the discussion in the central section of Hebrews. It is important for the author that the first mention is on the lips of God.

Verses 7-10 These omitted verses go to the heart of the matter. Note the echo of Gethsemane. “To save him *from death*” is in Greek *ek thanatou*, which has a double meaning (i) to save *from death* and (ii) to save *out of death*. It is this second meaning which is answered in the resurrection.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can I identify with the heartfelt prayer of Jesus in vv. 6-10? Has suffering *ever* been transformative in my experience?

2. What was my received sense of “being saved” and how do I engage with “being saved” in my life at present?

3. *Obey* is a tricky word for us today, as indeed is *submission*. Perhaps I could think of whole-hearted giving of myself, in faithfulness as another way of putting it.

PRAYER

God of faithful love, you appointed your Son as mediator to show us the depth of your love and compassion. Help us to engage with this great gift, in a whole-hearted way, through Christ our Lord.

And I will lead them back

Jer. 31:7 For thus says the LORD:
 Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
 and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
 proclaim, give praise, and say,
 “Save, O LORD, your people,
 the remnant of Israel.”

8 See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
 and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
 among them the blind and the lame,
 those with child and those in labour, together;
 a great company, they shall return here.

9 With weeping they shall come,
 and with consolations I will lead them back,
 I will let them walk by brooks of water,
 in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
 for I have become a father to Israel,
 and Ephraim is my firstborn.

INITIALS OBSERVATIONS

Our Old Testament reading is full of hope and confidence, against a background of failure and catastrophe. The prayer in v. 7 is really answered in vv. 8 and 9. The power of this reading is best appreciated when we bear in mind the preceding verses: *At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: “Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.”* (Jeremiah 31:1–6)

KIND OF WRITING

The reading is poetry, using very powerful imagery to get its message across. It help to see more exactly where it comes from. The book of Jeremiah is structured in two parts as follows:

- I. Jer 1-25 Destruction and Loss
- II. Jer 26-52 Restoration and Hope

Each major part is very rich in insight.

Part II

- 27:1-29:32: Differing theologies of hope
- 30:1-33:26 **The Book of Hope**
- 34:1-35:19 The new community
- 36:1-45:5 Hope amid disaster
- 46:1-51:64 Hope for the refugees

52:1-34: The restoration of King Jehoiachin as a pledge of hope.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Along with Isaiah (all three of them!) and Ezekiel, Jeremiah is one of the major prophets. The book we now have is an extraordinary literary and theological achievement. As we can see below from the structure, the first part of the book re-enacts the dismantling of tribal structures, cultic institutions and symbolic systems. The telling is full of haunting imagery and deep feeling. A world has simply collapsed. How to cope with the massive wreckage of a cherished world?

The second part of the book is devoted to a deep theology of suffering as the basis for the construction of new possibilities and restoration after the immense suffering of deportation. Given our situation of cultural “exile” at the moment, we have much to learn from Jeremiah.

RELATED PASSAGES

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:7–10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 To whom is the Lord speaking?

It is possible that Judah, that is, those who remained behind, is being addressed here. Cf. Is 52:8ff. above. The remnant of Israel is really characteristic of Isaiah—see Is 4:2-6; 6:12-13; 7:4-9; 10:20-26; 37:30-32.

Verse 8 The breadth of the invitation is striking. It might be a narrow reference to Israelites scattered in Assyria as well. Elsewhere, Jeremiah does speak of an enemy to the north (Jer 2-6). Or, indeed, it might an editorial addition, expressing a hope for universal salvation for all. After this the blind and the lame no longer feature in Jeremiah. However, for this prophet, the themes of conception and birth are at the heart of his message. They symbolise both joy and pain, in maternal mode.

Verse 9 Here we move to paternal imagery. Again the other figurative language echoes the themes of the Exodus, found frequently in relation to return and restoration. The singling out of Ephraim may surprise. It belongs to a much larger theme in the Hebrew Bible, whereby the firstborn cedes his place to the second born (Cain to Abel, Esau to Jacob, Manasseh to Ephraim). The key verse is found in Genesis 48:8-20. It seems to be part of the self-imaging of the Israelites. In the context of great empires, puny Israel is chosen as first-born by YHWH.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The feeling of being a remnant is understandably prevalent today...yet in the Bible, the remnant is the seed corn of future hope. Can I see any new shoots, any springtime of faith today?
2. The blind and the lame, often mentioned in the Bible, refer to real bodily handicaps, but may also be read metaphorically. Have I been blind? Have I been lame on the Way of discipleship?
3. The marvellous motherly and fatherly images invite reflection on who is God for me? When have I felt myself a true child of God, loved, held, cared for?

PRAYER

God of all, you know our need of healing and liberation. Let us be open to your gift and your guidance, that we may know we are all your daughters and sons and that you love us as a mother loves her offspring. As a communion of faith, help us hear “what the Spirit is saying to the church.” Amen.

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126 (125); Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading from Jeremiah is chosen first of all for the narrow reference to the blind and the lame. However, the wider context of restoration and salvation—achieved in Jesus the Messiah—is also in view.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 126 (125) is perfectly chosen for the reading and indeed for the Gospel. It expresses a great attitude of wonder at all God has wrought.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Perhaps the great temptation today is to think of God as remote. In this reading, using the imagery of parenthood, we see how close our God is to us all and how breathtakingly near we are to our God.

Second Reading

Hebrews 5:1-6

Hebrews is always reflecting on the great question: how did God come to our help in Jesus?

The answer is encouraging: by entering fully into our condition of being human. This is all the more astonishing because of who Jesus was, the very Son of God (Ps 2). The teaching is very appealing: he can help us precisely because he is one of us.

Gospel

Mark 10:46-52

Two things may help us hear this reading. First of all, it is not easy to insist against the pressure of others. Secondly, naming our own urgent need is a key to entering the path of discipleship.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 25 October

Romans 8:12-17

Abba Father is not that frequent in the New Testament. Paul uses it here to remind his hearers of their own practice

of prayer and thus bolster his persuasion.

Luke 13:10-17

The story of the woman bent double is a great story (strangely not read on Sundays). It has lots of potential at a metaphorical level. The argument used by Jesus to “excuse” his healing on the Sabbath is irrefutable.

Tuesday 26 October

Romans 8:18-25

St Paul is full of faith and hope; yet, he acknowledges the struggle. Yet for him—and for us—the key is how we respond to the costly travails.

Luke 13:18-21

Two brief parables with striking power. Both are parables of magnificent, unstoppable growth—as incredible then as now, and just as needed.

Wednesday 27 October

St Otteran, monk

Romans 8:26-30

The very first sentence of this reading is very consoling and often remembered. In the next few lines, Paul expands and explores the opening conviction.

Luke 13:22-30

The teaching in this Gospel is meant to be disturbing — disturbing to people who feel somehow complacent about “being saved”. The original context may be found in the ministry of Jesus but at Luke’s level the message is aimed at how own contemporaries.

Thursday 28 October

Sts Simon and Jude, apostles

Ephesians 2:19-22

Our reading opens up a fundamental question: what or who are we as Christian believers? Using a building

metaphor, the identikit is rich, to say the least.

Luke 6:12-16

Luke makes it plain that Jesus *prayed* before the choice and appointment of the Twelve. It is important to note that the Twelve function, in the ministry of Jesus, as a prophetic action, underscoring Jesus’ programme which was the restoration of Israel. Cf. “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” (Matthew 15:24 NRSV) By the time Luke is writing the restriction to the Jewish people of Jesus’ ministry was already in the distant past.

Friday 29 October

St Colman

Romans 9:1-5

In Romans 9-11, Paul embarks on the deepest reflection in the New Testament on the “no” of most of his co-religionists to Jesus. The split between Jews and Christians was already tragically apparent. It also cost Paul a great deal as we hear in this heartfelt confession.

Luke 14:1-6

It is a curiosity of Luke’s Gospel that Jesus eats just as frequently with Pharisees as with sinners. In today’s Gospel, the question of healing on the Sabbath comes to the fore. Jesus’ illustration powerful...if its okay to rescue an animal...

Saturday 30 October

Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 25-29

Paul rounds off his deep discussion of Jews in God’s plan of salvation with another heartfelt reflection. The last line of this reading is extremely significant and is the foundation stone of Jewish-Christian dialogue today: *but as the chosen people, they are still loved by God, loved for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.*

Luke 14:1, 7-11

In the culture of the period, dining with friends was highly regulated and stratified. Jesus’ advice is to subvert and reject these social conventions, not only as social conventions but as philosophy. Humbling yourself was not the expected behaviour of those on the way up.

