

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

Mission Sunday

24 October 2021

Welcome

In journalism, you hear the expression “the story has legs.” As you know, it means that some story or other is not going to go away any time soon and that, on the contrary, more and more dimensions will come to light. Something similar may be said about the Gospel just read. It is a mini-drama, unfolding in a dramatic dialogue and leading to a fundamental change of direction for the blind man.

Topic

Can this ancient story speak to us today? I think yes, it can, and in three ways.

Steps

During his ministry, Jesus healed people, men and women, young and old. As we know from our own experience of illness, it is a blessing to experience healing. There is more. The healings in the Gospel are never just anecdotes about some fortunate individuals who happened to encounter Jesus. Instead, they always point beyond themselves as examples of what God wants for all of us, as illustrations of the Good News and even of salvation itself. It is noticeable, for instance, in our story that Jesus says towards the end: your faith has saved you. St Paul would not have put it better. The Greek word “to save” means both to heal and to save, to salve as we might put it.

But this story has legs, so there is even more. Over the last few Sundays, we have all been challenged by Mark’s teaching on discipleship – the costly yet life-giving following of Jesus. That remarkable teaching climaxes today in the story of Bartimaeus. It is, of course, a healing story – his sight is restored. But it is also a story of discipleship. You may have noticed, as you listened, the key words: to call, to follow and The Way. Our translation speaks of the road, as if Mark were referring to asphalt. Bartimaeus follows Jesus not “on the road” but on The Way, capital letters. Perhaps John Newton had Bartimaeus in mind when he wrote the words,

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

The story of Bartimaeus invites reflection today. Just as in the story, becoming a disciple comprises need, encounter, healing and faith. Nevertheless, becoming a disciple is not a point of arrival but a point of departure. Following on The Way must continue to be not only personally transformative but also missionary.

Allow me to pause on missionary for a moment. All discipleship is missionary. That is to say, as disciples, we have heard the Good News and encountered Jesus. When we have

have been blessed by the gift of faith, the desire to share that blessing is hard-wired into discipleship. An outstanding example would be St Paul: for him there is no real distinction between being a disciple and being an apostle, being a follower of Jesus and being a bearer of the Good News. So also for us. Of course, this has become difficult for us today, at least in Ireland. In spite of the great missionary tradition, the home mission, the handing on of the faith has not worked for at least three decades and probably longer. This does not mean we should lose heart. Again, as St Paul says, *the love of Christ urges us on* (2 Corinthians 5:14).

In our time, we have a very special, even unique opportunity to connect again with the Good News as individual believers and as the community of faith. The proposed synodal pathway – an ambitious programme of listening to all 1.2 billion Catholics – is exactly what we need today. If I were to express my hopes for this courageous project, I would perhaps put it like this. I hope it will be a rediscovery of what it means to be Christian, a re-connecting with the Good News, with Jesus in the Spirit. This is for each one of us individually. I also hope it will be about a reformation of church – first of all to save the church from itself and to reset the compass so that “church” will again become a true servant of the Gospel. How it will all unfold is not quite clear, but it is our chance to turn things round. If not now, when? And if not this, what? As St Paul also said: See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Conclusion

It may seem we travelled far from the outskirts of Jericho to the centre of Dublin. I don't really think so. The story of Bartimaeus has legs, a deep story, with considerable potential for today. Each one of us is Bartimaeus – capable of a journey from need to encounter, from encounter to faith, from faith to proclamation. May it be so. Amen.