



27th October 2024 | 23rd Sunday in Pentecost

Responding to those who cry for God's mercy

*Who are you telling to be quiet,
who is calling out for God's mercy and healing?*

Have you ever watched a movie when the same incident is played out from different perspectives. We see this often in murder mysteries, when we're shown how the different characters could have committed the crime, and we need to decide which one is most plausible.

Well, I'd like us to step into the Gospel story and see what is happening from the perspective of each of the characters. In doing so, we'll notice lessons we can learn from each.

Now there are four main characters in this power encounter. There is Bartimaeus, the man described as a blind beggar. Although they are not specifically named, there are Jesus' disciples who would absolutely have been there that day with Jesus. There is the crowd, a mixture of people on the outskirts of Jericho, probably travelling from one town to the next. And there is Jesus, the one who's name was stirring a lot of questions.

Now, having listened to a few messages on this passage over the years, usually the preacher urges us to stand in Bartimaeus shoes. However, although, we will do that shortly, I'd like us to first step into the sandals of the crowds.

The crowd's perspective: Surely one born blind doesn't deserve our attention, let alone God's attention.

What was in the mind of many in the crowd in downtown Jericho society, who happen to be there on the outskirts that day? We know that Jesus had just been in Jericho. However, as he left before he got very far, one of the beggars started to make a commotion. Now when the crowds saw beggars, sitting beside the road, they intentionally looked the other way. They ignored them. They were a nuisance, the scourge of society – they were on the *outskirts* of town, because no one would let them *inside* the town. Where did such a belief system arise from?

We get a glimpse from the psalm we just read. In verse 21, "*Calamity will surely overtake the wicked; and those who hate the righteous will be punished.*"

When taken literally, which is how the religious leaders read the prophet's writings, it meant that Bartimaeus's blindness showed he was sinner, and his blindness was a punishment from God. He, therefore, was under the curse of the law. We see this mindset being played out when Jesus turned the tables on society by healing a man who had been born blind. The religious leaders described this man as "steeped in sin at birth" (John 9:34).

So, according to the crowd, Bartimaeus had no right to receive any honour or blessings from God. He had no right to expect God to listen to his prayers. He had no right to expect God to give him any attention. He was nothing in the eyes of first century Jericho society.

But, from the depths of the noisy shuffling throng of people that followed Jesus that day, a voice was suddenly heard. Everyone looked around, but when they realised, the voice came from a 'nobody', a 'beggar' they were indignant. What right did this sinner have to call out for God's mercy. So, the crowds responded as any self-respecting Jew would, shouting at him to 'Be quiet' (Mark 10:48) However, even their rebuke and disregard, only fuelled Bartimaeus resolve to be heard, and he cried out again and again, "*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.*" (Mark 10:47, 48).

Before we step into Bartimaeus shoes to understand what gave him the audacity and courage to defy society's carefully constructed rules of social conduct, let's allow ourselves to be challenged by how the crowd responded.

Who are we telling to 'be quiet'? Who, if we have ears to hear, is crying out to God for mercy and healing? Now, I know what you're thinking. 'I don't remember the last time I heard someone cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."' That may be the case, but all of us have heard the cries of people who society deems as 'unworthy of our time and money'. And how do we respond when people ask for our attention, our time or our mercy?

I am ashamed to admit that while I may not allow the words "Be quiet" to escape my mouth, inwardly I may be saying, "I just don't have time for you today. I'm too busy to listen to your problems."

How does the perspective of the crowds challenge us? What if someone is crying out for the mercy of a listening ear? What if they are crying out for the mercy of a safe place to cry? What if they are crying out for a miracle that only God can do? Who are we deeming not worthy of our time or attention?

Who are we saying, "I'm too busy to give you my full attention, and show you compassion and mercy." While these questions are worthy of our consideration, let's continue stepping into the shoes of this amazingly courageous man, Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus perspective: God's anointed King is merciful, a friend of sinners and outcasts. Therefore, he will turn and hear my prayer.

Blind people very quickly become extremely competent at listening to the conversations of the people around them. This is often the case when one of our five senses fails, the other senses are set to high alert. So, it is easy for us to guess what Bartimaeus heard on the lips of the

crowds. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was asking, 'Who is this man named Jesus?' 'Where does he get his authority over sickness and demons?' (see Mark 8:11) 'How can he perform such healings and miracles?', 'Is he a prophet?' 'Is he actually the promised Messiah, God's anointed King?'

However, what makes Bartimaeus unique, is that he didn't only hear the questions being asked, he recognised that the One who was passing nearby, was the only One who could heal him from his blindness. Bartimaeus obviously knew the promise God had made through the prophet Isaiah, that One would come who would *'open the eyes of the blind'* (Isaiah 42:7).

He also knew that this One didn't conform to society's rules, He didn't treat the outcasts as sinners, but rather He treated them as friends. And all on his own, this blind, un-educated, beggar – who would never have been permitted to enter the temple or any synagogue - had overheard the other part of Isaiah's prophesy, which promised that this promised Servant of God, *"will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle"* (Matthew 12:19-21).

And so, knowing that this One was within metres of where he sat, he got up and cried out, *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me"* (Mark 10:47) And he cried out with a nothing to lose attitude.

When Bartimaeus was successful at getting Jesus' attention, and was brought before Jesus, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you."

In some ways it is a strange question. I mean, isn't it obvious? This isn't the only time Jesus responded this way. But Jesus wanted them to declare their faith boldly, and thereby strengthen it. In response to their expression of faith, said, *"Go for your faith has healed you."* (Mark 10:52)

What do we learn from Bartimaeus?

How often do we 'cry out' with desperation for God's mercy and faithfulness? Do we keep crying out in prayer, or do we give up and conclude, it mustn't be God's will to heal me?

Before moving into stepping into the shoes of the disciples, it is worth us noticing, that this blind beggar, this 'nobody' from society's perspective, was given the honour of having his name listed in Mark's account. Although we can't be certain why, it may well have been the confidence and boldness Bartimaeus had to declare in front of everyone that Jesus was the Messiah; a confidence not shown by many.

The Disciple's Perspective: I need to learn that if I want to be a leader in Jesus' kingdom, I must be the servant of those around me.

What was in the minds and hearts of the disciples as Jesus walked ahead of them? When we recall last week's reading, we notice that James and John, had only hours earlier, pulled Jesus aside, and asked to sit right beside him in places of honour in heaven. Such a question sent a tremor through the close-knit group, and so Jesus had to remind them again about how his followers would live differently from those around them, serving the least, and being a slave of everyone else. (v46).

Even if the atmosphere of outrage and resentment had somewhat dissipated, we can be sure it was pulled right in front of them when Jesus was willing to disrupt his journey, and attend to a person society considered unworthy of any attention.

What do we learn from the disciples? How willing are we to be a servant of others? Are we willing to lay aside our own agendas, our own pride and status and do the jobs that no one else wants to do?

Application | Jesus' perspective: I've promised that whatever you ask in my name I will grant it, as long as it glorifies me. Are you praying for those who need God's healing and mercy, so that God is glorified through you?

Before we allow ourselves to retract saying, "I could never step into Jesus shoes." We do well to remember, what Jesus said shortly after He had risen from the dead.

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." (also see 1 John 4:17).

There is no question, we are called to be the healing hands of Jesus and the Gospel proclaiming feet of Jesus in this world.

That's why Mark wrote that *"miraculous signs will accompany those who believe; ... They will be able to place their hands on the sick and they will be healed"* (Mark 16:17,18b).

So, if someone shares with you a problem, that only God can answer, let us not block the power of God from flowing through us.

Rather, let us show tenacious faith, like Bartimaeus, so that all will see the glory of God and praise him for it.