**Beyond embarrassment:**

**the call of the blind**

**Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 27 October 2024**

**A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin**

**Pentecost 23B**

**Job 42.1-6 & 10-17; Mark 10.46-52**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Deep faith is often embarrassing. Maybe that is a reason we human beings avoid it. We typically prefer to seek to live ‘good’ lives, or the opposite: to seek to be respectable in our opinions and behaviour, or, alternatively, to find value and reputation in kicking against, or rorting, the system. Admittedly, in choosing radical pathways, we may also conceivably live out of the vulnerability of a type of deep faith. Yet that also risks centring ourselves in our own egos.

Deep faith however is not only about letting go of human conventions but also about letting go of ego, into God in godself. The expressions of this can be quite embarrassing, even alarming. Maybe that is why organised religion, including much of our Uniting Church traditions, often tries to keep deep faith under control, in liturgy and in church life.

Imagine, for example, if, like Francis of Assisi, we were indeed to heed Jesus’ call to the rich man and give away all we have to the poor. What if, like the original Quakers and Shaker communities, we were to be so overcome by the fire of pentecostal love that we would literally move in the Spirit, shaking and quaking, in our prayer and witness?

No wonder, faced by the zeal of early Methodism, that Bishop Joseph Butler famously told John Wesley that ‘*enthusiasm is a horrid thing*.’ That, surely, is not simply a classic English reaction to faith’s embarrassments. It also expresses much general unease about the consequences of letting go into God. For deep faith is beyond embarrassment, as we see in today’s Gospel story.

Bartimaeus’ story is certainly beyond embarrassing for a polite and reasoned audience, whether secular or religious. For a start, his behaviour is out of control. Not only does he not keep to his place, literally marginalised by the side of the road. He also totally ignores the stewards and the police guidelines.

He shouts out, and then, when he is told to be quiet, he shouts out even more loudly, yelling at the top of his voice. Perhaps most embarrassingly of all however, for polite and reasoned people, he cries out one of the most powerful phrases in the Bible:

‘*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*!’

Taking us to the very heart of the Gospel, Bartimaeus names Jesus as the Holy One of God and asks for Jesus’ compassion. For, embarrassing though it may still be to many, this is at the heart of Christian Faith: the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Christ, and of our need for God through Christ. So how are we going in acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, the bearer of salvation? How are *we* going in acknowledging our need for God through Christ? And what implications are there for us as we do so? These are three key questions arising from our Gospel story. Let me touch on each in turn, so that, like Bartimaeus, we may renew our sight and follow Jesus on the way.

Firstly, Bartimaeus’ story is clearly designed to encourage us to acknowledge Jesus more fully as the Holy One of God. Now, I know that is embarrassing to many Western people, and even to some Christians. It is, for example, fashionable in some progressive Christian quarters to seek distance from Christological affirmations, not simply those of the Creeds of the universal Church, but also those, like that of Bartimaeus, in the biblical tradition on which the Creeds are grounded. Are not such affirmations difficult to understand, it is argued, and potentially embarrassing in today’s world of great diversity of belief and practice? Is not what really matters about Jesus? What Jesus taught and modelled and not who Jesus was and is? Well, yes, and no…

Of course, Christians are wise to express our Faith in ways which honour the wisdom we can find in other places than our own. We also do well to continue the millennia old task of seeking reasoned explanations of Faith, reviewing and renewing our inherited traditions. Yet we help neither ourselves, nor the wider world, by shrinking the Light of our own Faith traditions. Embarrassing though it may seem to some, the integrity of Christian experience matters, including the core place of Jesus Christ. Yes, progressives are indeed right to challenge Christians to live out the love we proclaim in Jesus Christ. However, Christian Faith is not simply about helping us in how to live. It is also about living into, and out of, the power that enables us to live and love most fruitfully: that is, like Bartimaeus, acknowledging, and calling, on the name of Jesus.

We are back to the ‘*prepositional participation’* of which Eugene Peterson spoke.[[1]](#endnote-1) For Bartimaeus is the reverse of the rich man who came to Jesus seeking advice on how to live. Bartimaeus does not speak nicely out of his riches and righteousness but rather shouts! Shouting out of the poverty of his spirit and situation. Indeed, where the rich man turns away sadly from Jesus, unable to make a leap of faith, letting go of his wealth and security, Bartimaeus not only screams out to Jesus, but throws off the one possession - the cloak - he has, and follows Jesus with wholehearted joy. Bartimaeus recognises that prepositional participation – God with us, God in us, God for us – is vital for the true flourishing and purpose of his life. In making Jesus his core and focus, he enters into the fullness of life and models this for us.

For, secondly, our Gospel reading uses the Bartimaeus story as a way to call us to own, and express, ourneed of God: living, not out of our supposed strengths, like the rich man, but out of our vulnerabilities, like Bartimaeus. It is helpful in this to place today’s story in its context, both in the narrative structure of Mark’s Gospel and also in relation to the theme of blindness, as blindness is used here as a symbol for spiritual darkness and not just as a description of Bartimaeus’ physical health. For this story acts as the second bookend of the middle section of Mark’s Gospel, the main teaching section, which begins with another story of the healing of a blind man, the first bookend.

In between, we hear again and again of the failure to understand Jesus’ teaching by those around him, or who come to him. Significantly, there is also a transition between the two stories of the blind men. In the first, sight is restored only in stages. The man healed has no name and he is largely passive. In Bartimaeus’ case, he is named, as he names Jesus, and his sight is fully restored - and not, we can trust, because Jesus has become more adept at healings! Rather, where the first blind man was a figure of the disciples' struggles to see the meaning of Christ, in Bartimaeus we find the full model of discipleship: one which fully acknowledges Jesus’ holy identity and fully responds.

Crucially, Bartimaeus is shouting out to Jesus out of his need. This contrasts starkly with the earlier Gospel story of James and John, who are asked the same question by Jesus that he asks Bartimaeus: ‘*what do you want me to do for you*?’ They, lacking understanding, ask for power and honour. Bartimaeus instead asks for sight. In other words, he asks for understanding, which he also shows in his acknowledgement of Jesus as Son of David. Note well, this is the very first time such a title is applied to Jesus by anyone in the Gospel. Note well also, that this story takes place at Jericho, reminding us of Rahab and a new stage in the journey of the people of faith long before. It thus acts as a climax to the middle section of the Gospel, declaring Jesus’ identity and what it means to be a disciple. Immediately afterwards, Jesus enters into Jerusalem and the passion story begins. We are thereby led into the deeper mysteries of God.

For, thirdly, Bartimaeus’ story is an encouragement to go deeper into faith. Indeed, we might say it is best read as a way into Christian prayer. It shows us prayer as linking together holy encounter, with acknowledgement of the experience of God, expression of our true needs, and responsiveness to the call of God. This kind of prayer, Mark’s Gospel is saying, is at the heart of true discipleship. Indeed, Bartimaeus’ story is perhaps best read as a way into Christian prayer because that is exactly what his opening cry is – a prayer: ‘*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*’ This is a prayer which Orthodox Christianity has particularly taken up, which lies at the heart of Orthodox Christian discipleship, and upon which we might also fruitfully reflect, and even adopt.

Within Eastern Christianity, Bartimaeus’s story is thus reflected in the Jesus Prayer, sometimes simply called The Prayer, with this brief formula: ‘*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*’ This phrasing also of course draws powerfully on the story of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke’s Gospel, where the model of faith is again the person who acknowledges their need of God, and not the one striving for righteousness. Vitally, it is again as the publican, like Bartimaeus, utters their prayer that they are healed, find salvation, and receive grace to live afresh.

‘*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*.’ In Eastern Christian spirituality, there is encouragement to say this prayer continuously: firstly verbally, and then internally, until it becomes a constant refrain in the depths of the heart and the Christian then ‘prays continuously’ as St Paul encouraged. Thereby, as Metropolitan Anthony Bloom put it, the Jesus Prayer can help us always ‘*to stand in God’s presence’*, focusing our attention on God in all that we do. Of course, it is not intended as a magical incantation, or even a mere mantra. For the Orthodox know that the deep prayer is a lifelong journey, and needs accompanying by other aids, including the sacramental life of the Church. Yet, from the first centuries, it has been a fruitful practice enabling the growth of the kind of true focus, healing, and transformation which we see modelled in the story of Bartimaeus.

‘*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’*.

One of the challenges of the Jesus Prayer for most Western Christians is that we are influenced by a different understanding of sin from that in Eastern Christianity. For in Western Christianity, we live with the shadow of the satisfaction theory of atonement, in which sin is typically regarded as a matter of law and punishment, with remedy only by grace.

In Eastern Christianity however, sin is not so much associated with guilt or law-breaking, but rather with the impetus to become something more than we already are, and with healing from sickness and spiritual blindness. A Christian thus repents not so much because they are, or are not, virtuous, but because human nature can change and they are asserting their freedom to become even more divine than they already are. Like Bartimaeus, invoking the name of Jesus Christ is therefore about prepositional participation: letting go of what has been to share in the life and love of God, with us, in us, and for us.

This brings me back, in conclusion, to enthusiasm and John Wesley, whose own spiritual teaching, is perhaps closer than most Westerners to that of Eastern Christianity, at least on sanctification, growing in holiness. For spiritual enthusiasm can indeed be deeply embarrassing, even ‘horrid’. Wesley himself understood that and the need for balance in faith, particularly through depth of appreciation of scripture, tradition, and the best of human reason.

Yet, without experience of the living God, and wholehearted willingness to respond, he knew our hopes of personal and social transformation are so easily thwarted. So, like Bartimaeus, Wesley encouraged us to open our own hearts that they too might, like his, be ‘*strangely warmed’*:

so that, like Bartimaeus, we too might shout, and see, and follow.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

1. See further <https://www.penandinkreflections.org/blog/leaping-in-faith> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)