

SERMON FOR THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY | 28.10.2018

I am not the only one in this congregation with bad eye-sight. And what went wrong with my eyes when I was a very small child, I have continued to worsen with far too much time spent in front of a computer screen. The ads for Specsavers, full of embarrassing things that happen when you can't see, aren't so funny when they sometimes happen to you!

Today's Gospel, the story of Bartimaeus, comes at an odd time in the Church's calendar. It has been the 'green season' (Sundays after Trinity) since early June and the theory is that that green is supposed to symbolize all the growing that has been taking place in our hearts and minds ever since. So it could be said to be a bit of a slap in the face that we are now, despite all this time, being described as blind! But let's move on and see what God has to share with us today.

The Gospel setting is familiar to anyone who walks the pavements of any big city the world over. Sitting against the wall is Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. I suspect he was probably a very familiar figure on that bit of the street, always sitting in the same place; people would know him. Yesterday I watched just such a person outside the Tescos on Islington Green being talked to by a women whose bouncy dog wouldn't leave him alone. I think he was grateful for the attention.

Blind though he is, somehow Bartimaeus catches hold of the news that Jesus is coming in his direction - and he has heard that Jesus has the power to heal people. What should he do? He doesn't reach for a prayer book (even if he could read one) nor does he ask someone to attract Jesus' attention for him. He simply bawls out the first thing that comes into his head: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*

People like Bartimaeus are, of course, just plain embarrassing. They are too direct, too loud, too pushy. Not surprisingly the respectable people tell him to pipe down, to stop drawing attention to himself. But he's having none of it. Without a moment's hesitation he shouts out again: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*

And it seems to work. Jesus stops and tells those closest to him to fetch the beggar from his spot on the pavement. *What do you want* says Jesus? *To see*, says the blind man. And then Jesus' words: *Go, your faith has made you well.*

Even at this distance we can imagine his elation: first a glimmer of hope, then his cry for help and finally Bartimaeus' encounter with the living, breathing Jesus who tells him that it is his faith that has made it possible for him to have his sight restored. Eureka!

And we could develop a sermon along the lines of: 'if only we had faith like Bartimaeus, we too could see...' But we know that, in reality, life isn't always like that.

On the front of the Weekly News today I have mentioned a really interesting book: *Leaving Alexandria*. It was written by the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway. As Isabel Nisbet will tell you because she has met him, he is extraordinarily gifted, charming – and disarmingly honest. The book is autobiographical but it is much more than that because what Richard does is to sketch a lifetime of association with the Christian faith and with the Church – letting us into his thinking at the every stage of his long journey.

Without giving the game away as I hope that at least some of you will get yourselves a copy so that we can discuss it over the next few weeks and into Advent, one of the issues he talks about is the way in which so many people find themselves in places like St James', 'because they like Church'.

They like the sense of community, they like the ceremonial – for Anglican Catholics like Richard the bells and the smells, the drama of the Mass and the structure of the Church's year. They like the reassurance that good preaching provides and they find beauty in the words and the music which leaves them with such a feeling of comfort. Indeed the very familiarity with what happens on a Sunday takes on a life of its own and goes some way to acting as a rock and an anchor against those moments when something goes wrong and we have no rational explanation to explain what has happened to us.

But what steadily began to creep into Richard's soul was an emptiness, a feeling that at the heart of all this activity there wasn't the kinds of relationship that Bartimaeus had with Jesus. The more he called out, the greater the silence he encountered. While the religious ritual warmed his heart and his senses, he longed for Jesus to come to him and ask, *what is it that you want?* The sadness of this book – which I really do recommend – is that there remains the deepest longing in Richard Holloway for the voice of God.

And that takes us to this hugely important question: how do we hold on to faith when that voice is missing? Isn't the experience of Church – the music, the preaching and the sense of community enough to hold us up when doubt comes stalking 'like a shadow in the night'?

I don't for one minute believe that this Gospel story is given to us today just to celebrate the restoration of Bartimaeus' ability to see. That would be too arbitrary for words: there are millions of people who can't see and who, pray as they might, will never be able to see properly again. So I need another route for my enquiry

And so I turn to the French philosopher Simone Weill. Born into a very secular Jewish family, Simone Weill had come to the conclusion as a teenager that the existence of God couldn't be known, one way or the other. Like Richard Holloway she was drawn into the Church somewhat unexpectedly and what moved her was the language and culture – in her case the hymn singing of some Portuguese peasants when she was holiday. She later learned to pray, in the small Church of San Damiano which St Francis had built in Assisi.

And this is how she coped with not hearing the voice of Jesus like blind Bartimaeus. For Simone, there were two important things to understand: first, if God is all perfect, he has to limit himself - to give us room to be human, to make mistakes, to be ourselves. To be his creatures we can only occupy the space where God isn't.

Second, in this space where God isn't, evil exists. And horrible though that may seem, evil has a purpose: the purpose of evil for Simon Weill is to drive us out of ourselves and towards God. As we learn to hate evil and all its consequences, so we are drawn more and more towards love and caring for others – which of course is where God is to be found. Weill believed that while we are never able to love perfectly, we are still hard-wired to want to overcome evil and every injustice. So every form of pain drives us upwards and onwards, caring for others and, at the same time, ever closer and closer towards God.

Her great idea was simply this: if we humans are to grow, God must be absent and withdrawn from us. The absence of a physical and emotional closeness with God releases faith. And it is faith that makes us into what God always intended that we should be.

So is that it? Are we never to hear or see God? Is it true that all we can expect is that we will have occasional experiences of people overcoming huge difficulties so that we can say, ‘Hey, there is God at work’. Is it too much to expect that we might look forward to something a bit warmer and a bit more reassuring?

Well, I did warn you that Simone Weill was a philosopher! And a fair bit of her writing does feel rather cold and calculating.

But what she taught does act as a kind of safety net when there are times – in all of our lives – when God seems a long way away. And I for one am always a bit suspicious of those who seem to manufacture a kind of saccharine, evangelical, happy-clappy, sentimental spirituality as an everyday experience.

Don’t get me wrong: I am profoundly grateful for those times when I have felt the reassuring hand of God in my life. This week has been quite unexpectedly full of such occasions as I have seen the power of God alive and at work in the people I have been lucky enough to meet.

Yet I can’t help feeling for the likes of Richard Holloway. You can sense his longing for the warming presence of God to pervade all that he does – the presence that he needs, emotionally, to underpin the hugely generous care he (and his amazingly patient wife) have extended to others throughout their long ministry together in the Church.

But Jesus was right: it was Bartimaeus’ faith that made him able to see. And faith came before the revelation and the miracle. *He trusted in God - and God delivered him* as Psalm 22 reminds us. Bartimaeus believed; Bartimaeus trusted – and the result was his ability to see things in a new way as a result.

Ultimately our religious lives are not about hymns and sermons, about doing good things in and around the Church or even being utterly convinced that we know all the answers. The bottom line is living with this prayer on our lips: *Lord I believe; help thou my unbelief.*