



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (27th October) 2024

There is almost something of dance underlying the structure of this morning's Gospel reading. Jesus is, as it were, skipping along the road when He passes near to Bartimaeus; Bartimaeus calls out to Him and Jesus calls the blind beggar to Him; Jesus asks Him what he wants, Bartimaeus says he wants his sight restored, Jesus obliges and they skip off together.

Frivolous as that analysis of the narrative might sound, in fact, it breaks down the story into a number of constituent elements, which provide a model of the process by which people come to Faith. An individual becomes aware of Jesus in a particular situation and calls out to Him; Jesus in return, as we say today, reaches out to her or him and removes that within the person, which is a block to Faith and she or he embarks on or resumes a Christian pilgrimage.

In this, we see fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah, which we heard as the first reading, that those who have been separated from God will be led back to Him. Those things about their lives, which have estranged them from Him in one way or another, will be lifted or cured; and the vision is of a multitude joyfully returning to their God.

Yet, as with so much about the life of Faith, this is not really a question of an event, but of a process: each individual dance, as it were, is itself just a number in a greater ballet.

We see this when we contemplate that the Mass itself fits into the framework embodied in the story of Blind Bartimaeus. The knowledge that a Mass is to be celebrated enables us to hear God's call to gather before the Altar; He then speaks to us through the proclamation of Scripture, we make our requests of Him, to which He responds by drawing closer to us in the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. In the Procession to the Altar, we follow Him and receive the anticipation of our union with Him as we receive Holy Communion. This, as we know, we do again and again: hopefully - if a little falteringly - incrementally strengthening our determination to follow Christ in prayer and daily life, drawn onwards by the Sacramental glimpse of the end of our journey.

One of the important details about the story of Blind Bartimaeus is that, although not his fault, the impediment to follow Christ lies within himself. In turn, it is his desire to overcome this barrier, to which Christ responds when He cures him.

It is easy for us to identify the factors, which conspire to impede our own inclination to follow Christ, as lying without ourselves: considerations, which press on us from the world around us. Whilst these are often very real - if you can have degrees of reality - the issue is as much to do with how we respond to them as with the fact of them.

When Jesus inquires what we want Him to do for us, the impulse, often is to ask that the barriers to following Him be removed; but, perhaps, often, rather, we should request the capacity and insight to be able to integrate these factors into the momentum of our Christian journey: not to remove them, therefore, but to teach us how to overcome their power to act as barriers and, instead, understand how they can be repurposed within our lives to strengthen our life of Faith: how, in the words of the Eucharistic Preface for Requiem Masses, they can be changed not taken away.

When first we hear the story of Blind Bartimaeus, it is easy to suppose that it is a simple tale of miraculous healing - the sort of thing for the which many yearn but few experience. However, it was included in the Gospel narrative, not so that we could hear about the fortune of others, but learn from it something about the nature of our own discipleship.