

‘The Beating Heart of God’s Community’
A Sermon for the Last Sunday after Trinity 2018

Jeremiah 31.7-9

Mark 10.46-end

I am loving the new Dr Who. Forget all the hysteria about whether a woman is able to play the role of an asexual alien with two hearts who is more than 950 years old, Jodie Whittaker has all the energy and quirkiness needed and is playing an absolute blinder. In the last episode we travelled with the Doctor and her band of friends through time and space to 1950s Alabama where they meet the famous Rosa Parks. It was Rosa who courageously refused to give up her seat on a bus for a white person in a time of segregation and criminalisation of people of colour. Her action got her forcibly arrested but precipitated the ending of the segregation laws and her eventual honouring with the Congressional Gold Medal in 1999. What I particularly loved about the episode is that Rosa takes centre stage, and that the Doctor only looks on in the final scene telling the others ‘we have to not help her’ as an iconic moment of history plays itself out. The Doctor, a white woman, simply has to observe the power of this black woman’s action.

In our readings today we get a new perspective on justice. As Angus Ritchie says in this week’s Church Times, Mark ‘juxtaposes a series of able-bodied men who either misunderstand or reject Jesus’s message with marginalised people (women, children and now Bartimaeus) who exemplify a faithful response.’ Throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus radically challenges us to look again as to where the significant people are, not to the powerful or the comfortable, but constantly to the edgy and the marginal, to those who are overlooked or undervalued. Just like last week when Jesus speaks up for women in terms of disposability and divorce and overturns his disciples’ hasty rejection of powerless children, so now Jesus

responds to the audacious cries of a blind man, even as others tell him to be quiet and get out of the way.

What is really significant is that Bartimaeus is one of the only recipients of Jesus' saving acts in this gospel who is named. Did he become a follower of Jesus and one of the founding members of the early church? I'd certainly like to think so. But with Mark naming him, we hear something of real significance. In a world where those with disabilities were seen as less than whole, and, worse than that, positively sinful, Bartimaeus is shown to be a person of real faith and insight. Unlike those who think they can see, but constantly and deliberately fail to understand who Jesus is, Bartimaeus proclaims the truth in uncompromisingly loud terms, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' It seems the truth of Jesus blinds those who believe they see so clearly they have no need of repentance and imaginative transformation, but those who have to live with their own frailty can see exactly who this Jesus is and have no shame in asking him to reach out and touch them.

We need to be careful here though, because this isn't just about Jesus' ministry to a person in need. Rather than just a problem to be solved, Bartimaeus is shown to be a model disciple. His openness to Jesus is a scandal to those on the inside, an affront to those people of faith who are so righteous they have no need for a change in perspective, no need to really see the world through his eyes. Even as others see him as an inconvenience and an impediment, Jesus recognises him as a person of worth, calling him out of the crowds and into a real encounter which leaves us and Bartimaeus transformed. As Myers tells us, 'as with the impure woman, the "least," against formidable odds, have been healed because they have taken the initiative of faith.' (p.282) Whereas James and John had earlier responded to Jesus' question about 'what do you want me to do for you?' with pleadings for status and privilege, Bartimaeus says 'let me see again.' It is only as we recognise the blindness of chasing after power and seek true vision that we can become disciples of the kingdom and the adventure of faith can begin.

Turning back to our first reading today, the prophet Jeremiah's vision is no less radical. Chapters and chapters of judgement, following the people's inability to connect worship with justice has led to the final catastrophe of exile, but beyond this hope blossoms again. But with the privileged and the powerful carried off into exile and the pomp and prestige of royalty ended, who is it that can dare to hope? The prophet puts it poetically and powerfully, 'See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour together, a great company, they shall return.' This is what Kathleen O'Connor writes in her awesome book *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*: 'the survivors returning to Zion will form a procession of the forgotten, the disabled, and the vulnerable. Although they are the lowest in society, they will be the beating heart of the restored community... For a nation seemingly doomed to extinction at the hands of Babylon, the vulnerable and broken themselves will become the promised bearers of its future, a future of unimaginable reversals.' (p.106)

Recently I have heard much about the future of the Church of England, of a Church that has seemingly lost its bearings, of a Church that is anxious for the future and is facing difficult times, times of exile, displacement, incomprehension and loss. What would it mean to draw the vulnerable and the marginal to the centre of our Church and to find in them the promise of our future? I wonder.