

## **What do you want me to do for you? – A Homily for the Last Sunday after Trinity**

*Jeremiah 31.7–9*

*Hebrews 7.23–28*

*Mark 10.46–52*

When was the last time you were confronted by someone begging on the street? I wonder, how did you respond? Such encounters, however fleeting, test us, our humanity, our Christianity. They challenge our platitudes, denials and quick fixes. They call us to discernment and compassion before the face of another.

Today's Gospel confronts us with this all-too-common situation, something that sadly looks to become more widespread as we face the damaging economic and social effects of the pandemic, Brexit, the end to universal credit top-ups and many other factors. In the Gospel, a blind man, begging on the side of a road, calls out to Jesus for mercy as he walks past in a large crowd.

The Gospel intensifies the challenge of this encounter in several ways. First, it gives us the name of the beggar, Bartimaeus, reminding us that everyone, whatever their circumstances, however much they disturb us, has a name, is an irreplaceable person made in God's image. Secondly, as his name reveals, Bartimaeus is someone's child. He is the son of Timaeus. Like all of us, he has a family, he was raised by someone, perhaps he was loved, perhaps he was cast out, perhaps his

family fell on tragic times. Third, Bartimaeus, does not beg for money but for mercy. In its full biblical sense, mercy is not simply a guilty person's request for leniency or forgiveness but a plea for heartfelt compassion amid suffering; a compassion rooted in love. And, finally, the Gospel states that members of the crowd try to silence Bartimaeus' cry of mercy.

This last point hits us hard if we consider that many of Jesus' disciples were in the crowd. The Gospel exposes just how easy it is for those who claim to know, love and follow Christ to distort what this means. For there is a way of being religious where we make ourselves blind and deaf to the needs of others. Perhaps we have become complacent and lack gratitude because we are convinced that we belong to the group of elect, the redeemed. We know who Jesus is, why should we worry? Perhaps we are too busy talking amongst ourselves and making our own plans that we fail to hear others or follow God's plan of costly love revealed in Christ. Perhaps we demand that others prove they believe what we believe before we help them. We make compassion conditional. Perhaps we are so taken up in wanting to fit in with the crowd and please those we think are important that we fail to see others in need. Or perhaps we feel we have fulfilled our religious duty to God and neighbour by regularly attending church, reading our bibles, receiving the sacraments, saying our prayers, contributing our time and money to parish life. In all this,

while we may be Christian, we have not put on the mind of Christ, our hearts are not open to others as Christ's heart is. And, of course, this applies not just to how we respond to beggars on the street but any individual in need, to any of the pressing problems of our age that cry out for mercy – violence against women and children; irreversible environmental destruction; the plight of refugees; the imbalances between rich and poor.

Here the Gospel reminds us that it is precisely to those whom we reject that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Bartimaeus doesn't care if he offends. He rebuffs all attempts to silence him by shouting out even more loudly to Jesus. Bartimaeus' already knows what it means to rely on others. This makes him alive to Jesus' presence. It emboldens him with the confidence that is the hallmark of faith in God, the same confidence, incidentally, with which we should pray the Lord's prayer. Met by such disregard for polite behaviour, perhaps we would be tempted to come down harder on Bartimaeus. Not so Jesus.

As Bartimaeus' cry resounds above crowd, the Gospel says something captivating about Jesus. He stood still. This is more striking if we remember that Jesus has set his sights on going to Jerusalem to complete his saving mission that culminates in his suffering and death. Now, however, Jesus takes a break in this vital journey. Jesus stands still. His entire being is attentive to the cry of one in need. Bartimaeus is all that matters. Here is a shimmering icon of how Jesus is touched

by the prayer of those who call upon him. This is the stillness of God hearing our prayer; the creative stillness that holds together the fabric of existence.

And in this stillness, Jesus' loving compassion is fully at work. It is a stillness that ripples through the crowd, transforming the hearts of those present, calling them to service. For when Jesus tells the disciples to call Bartimaeus to him, it is clear that their entire attitude changes. Instead of trying to silence Bartimaeus, they encourage him, using words Jesus himself uses elsewhere in the Gospel. Take heart, get up, he is calling you. Jesus succours hearts. Jesus lifts people to health. Jesus calls people into the fullness of life.

Bartimaeus' prayer for mercy brings about a startling reversal. The disciples are more beggars than he. They are in need of rediscovering their call to share Jesus compassion with others, something they are able to do only because Jesus has first shown them mercy. With them, we too are called not just to imitate Jesus' words but enact the compassionate mercy of his heart.

In the rest of today's Gospel passage, Jesus shows us what this looks like. In contrast to the crowd, Jesus draws close to Bartimaeus and engages him in dialogue. By asking "What do you want me to do for you?", Jesus shows an intensely personal interest, one that is respectful and sensitive to Bartimaeus' self-understanding of his circumstances. While it may seem obvious that Bartimaeus would

want to be healed of his blindness, Jesus does not second guess him. Jesus takes time to listen. He gives Bartimaeus space to talk, encourages him to share what is on his heart. And when Bartimaeus replies honestly, in the boldness of faith, Jesus acts decisively. In an echo of the first day of creation, Jesus lets there be light, restoring Bartimaeus' sight.

What is notable is that all this happens without Bartimaeus having to confess belief in Jesus. He asks only for mercy. Bartimaeus did not have to say the right things or conform to everyone else's expectations. His faith shouts out in his desire to encounter Christ. The miracle of this encounter is about more than the restoration of physical sight. Bartimaeus and all those present are given new vision to see how God's compassionate mercy works in the flesh, a vision of mercy that calls and empowers them. As it does to us today, in our encounter with Christ in word and sacrament.

In this struggling world of ours, which so often drowns out voices that cry for help, let us too be bold like Bartimaeus, cast off our dehumanising inhibitions and put on the compassionate stillness of Christ and always be ready to draw close to those in need, listen with patience, and enlist them in creating communities of mercy – communities traveling on the road to Jerusalem, to love's victory over death; communities where no one is excluded and where the constant refrain is "What do you want me to do for you?"