

Proper 25, Trinity 20 (last)

Jeremiah 31:7-9
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52

On Tuesday last week, I had just finished lunch when the phone rang. On the other end was a man whose son died on that day last year aged 18 in a road accident. He and his family were in church and wanted to light some candles to mark the event. Could I tell him where the candles were. I asked him if he would like me to come and be with them, and they said yes. So off I went. I found the box of small candles, and lit the altar candles while the family arranged 9 or 10 small candles on the altar and stood holding hands in remembrance and shared grief. I knelt behind them and prayed quietly but audibly, giving thanks for the man's life and the joy he brought, and asked for comfort for the grieving family, and for the soul of the young man.

It was the most moving thing I've done so far in my curacy, for a number of reasons, some of which are that they wanted to do it, that they wanted me to join them, that they were so obviously moved, and that they were so obviously thankful that I'd joined them. And of course, the accidental death of a young person must always be one of the most difficult things that a family and a clergyman has to deal with.

Ask and it will be granted.

Bartimaeus asked and it was granted.

There are two significant parts of this story, to my mind.

- The first is that B had to ask. Jesus knew that B was blind, but Jesus didn't do anything until B had asked for help.
- And the second is that B knew exactly what he wanted. He didn't ask for anything less. He didn't just ask that he might come to terms with blindness – a reasonable enough request you'd think. He asked for healing, and he got it. There's a lesson there. We can be up front and ask for exactly what it is we want. There is no need to think 'oh I'll not ask for the whole thing, because I might be disappointed if I only get part of it'. Bartimaeus asked for what he wanted.

We need to know what it is we want, and then ask for it.

The same message comes from the Jeremiah lesson too. Yahweh God **tells** the Israelites to ask for salvation, assistance. He actually **tells** them to ask, almost as if he waits to act until he's asked.

There is something deeply authentic in human terms about this. We have to recognize our own needs before we are in a position to ask them to be granted. Prayer unlocks God's purpose within us, and makes us more singleminded about our real aims.

Here is a rather crude illustration. If I give you a present, let's say some mountaineering equipment, you won't thank me for it unless you happen to be a mountaineer. And since none of you is, that present will be useless and might well be resented. I know well enough that a gift is made a gift only if recipient recognises it as such. I am not grateful for something I don't want – and that was always how I felt as a child, and still do, when I'm given something as a surprise – I want my gifts to be things I want.

And it's the same with this story. God, I think, wants us to recognise what it is we lack – not what we need – these are different things. I might think I need a new coat, but I don't **lack** it – the old one is serviceable enough. But mere recognition is not enough for them to be met. Jesus wants us to realise what it is we lack, and ASK that they be fulfilled. Then as Jesus made Bartimaeus see, so will we see more clearly how to deal with what it is we lack.

This has something to do with the fact that God wants us to be responsible about our own situation and needs. Holy Scripture read over the last few weeks gives out this message.

- We need to nurture our relationships with care, as I told you when I was here last.
- In the parable of the rich man trying to enter the kingdom of heaven, we heard the message that we need to give up the things we hold most dear – riches in his case, but it could be attitudes, or practices, or anything that keeps our attention focussed inwards on ourselves instead of outwards to others and the world.
- In the various instructions of Jesus to give up our families, we hear the same message – not to fall out with our relatives, but rather to stop being dependent on them and making them dependent on us – in other words, to be responsible for ourselves and let others be responsible for themselves.

These things are very difficult to do, and in trying to do them, we need to become dead to the old life and embrace the new – the resurrection story. This is what the cross and resurrection is all about.

There is an old joke that I rather like
Psychiatrists and light bulbs

But there is great psychological truth in it, and that is exactly what the parable of Bartimaeus is saying to me. We have no chance of getting what we want until (a) our eyes have been opened to what it is that we lack, and (b) we have asked for it.

You may say that so often our prayers go unanswered – and yes, I feel like that too sometimes. It may be, of course, that they are answered – in ways that we don't recognize. But I also wonder if in fact the problem is that we haven't got to the bottom of the problem and asked for the right thing. Remember, Bartimaeus asked for what he really really wanted. He knew he was blind. There was no pretence about him, he knew what he lacked, he had assessed the issue correctly. This places a great burden on us in prayer and intercession. We need to do some serious self-examination in order to recognize our weaknesses and things we lack, and that is hard work – crucifixion of the old, and resurrection in the new. But the rewards can be healing.

And as far as today's message is concerned, asking for healing for ourselves requires that we recognize what it is that needs healing. In the case of the young man's family, they were not asking for anything for him: he was at peace. But they were asking for healing for themselves. I don't know whether they got it – but they looked as if they did. They had experienced the emptiness of the cross, they had passed through the three days of recognizing what it is they wanted in terms of healing, and I suggest, the very act of asking for it, or doing something about it, was for them a resurrection. And healing does not mean necessarily that the former circumstances are restored, but that we come to terms with them, or at least become more at ease with them.

To anyone who is suffering from illness, or distress, this is indeed gospel - good news.

Amen.

Reference to Hebrews lesson if this is a Eucharist (not today)
Former priests limited by life and time and space
Now, as priest for ever, he is eternal
Melchisedech is a theophany, a type of eternal Christ

- **B was BOLD, we should be BOLD**
- **Jesus waits for us to see what we need.**
- **B was not slow to ASK, we should not be slow to ASK**
- **We too easily tolerate what we shouldn't**