

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 24th October 2021
The Last Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Merciful God,
teach us to be faithful in change and uncertainty,
that trusting in your word
and obeying your will
we may enter the unfailing joy of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Mark 10:46-end

They came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Sermon by John Richardson

When I read today's Gospel I thought I'd got the wrong week, because there is Jesus asking the same question that he asked in last week's Gospel: "What do you want me to do for you?" Last week the question was addressed to the disciples. This week it is addressed to the blind beggar Bartimaeus. His answer was different to that of the disciples, and for very good reason. Eventually, Jesus gets an answer from him, but not before Bartimaeus has twice said: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

Bartimaeus is blind. He is a beggar, so he has no money or means of supporting himself. He is sitting by the roadside, so he has no home or family to care for him. He must want lots of things, but all he seems to want is mercy. He knows that without mercy nothing else will happen. Having asked twice for mercy, we finally get to know what it is that Bartimaeus wants: "My teacher, let me see again." Now we know what he really wants, but it must begin with mercy.

What do we mean by "mercy?" More importantly, what does it mean to be "merciful?" It is the way in which we approach things: in particular the way we approach other people. It means to be compassionate, to be understanding, to be non-judgemental, to be tolerant, to be caring, to be loving. As my dictionary tells me, being merciful means affording relief from misery. Which means that the act of being merciful often means having concern for those who are suffering through no fault of their own.

But being merciful is more than just an attitude. As with the story of Bartimaeus, it means a preparedness to do something. Being merciful is not just a question of approaching the other person in a certain way without preconceptions or prejudices. It is about what we do in response to those who are asking us to be merciful.

Bartimaeus asked for mercy. Many in our world today are not in a position to ask for mercy. Even so, it may be obvious to us that they are in need of a merciful response to their situation.

On Monday I listened to Thought for the Day on Radio 4. Bishop James Jones was reflecting on the tragic death of the MP Sir David Amess. He spoke about the state of our society, about our anxiety and fear of the future and about the general tone of public debate. He said that if he had to choose one word to describe the mood of our public discourse, not just about this issue, but about the way in which public discourse is conducted generally, he would choose the word "merciless."

The quality of mercy has largely disappeared from the way in which people conduct their affairs and take part in public debate. Little mercy is shown towards those who dare to disagree. When disputes and differences arise there is little room for mercy. There is nothing new in this. The parliament of 1388 was known as the "Merciless Parliament" when it condemned Richard the Second's friends. Four of his knights were executed. Others were exiled to Ireland.

Bishop Jones described churches as temples of mercy. At least, that's what they are meant to be. Yet all too often Christian churches as well as other religions are merciless in their dealings with one another. Sometimes there appears to be no room for mercy. It is forgotten that mercy is the first quality of the Christian disciple. If you want to become a member of the Salvation Army, you must first kneel at what is called the Mercy seat to bear public witness to your Christianity. Mercy and discipleship go together.

Mercy, it seems, is in short supply, and not just in today's Gospel.

What that Gospel story tells us is that to have mercy means more than simply having a certain attitude towards the other person: it means doing something to show that we are merciful. Jesus brought love, compassion and healing to Bartimaeus in response to his plea for mercy.

If we want to know what it means to be merciful, then we need look no further than chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel. It's a passage all about judgement. It describes the time when Jesus will return as judge. He will set out what his followers have done as well as what they have failed to do. That passage is known as "The seven corporal works of mercy". The list of works of mercy includes tending the sick, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for strangers and visiting prisoners. Such works of mercy begin with understanding, tolerance, compassion, love. But they do not stop there. Mercy means putting such things into action. Matthew writes: Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare wrote:

"The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.
It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes;
It is an attribute of God himself."

So mercy is an attribute of God himself. Bartimaeus knew that just as he knew that this man Jesus came from God and because he came from God he was merciful. The quality of mercy characterised the life of Jesus.

Bartimaeus pleaded for mercy because he knew, as we do, that the care and love and help we receive begins with a mercy.

Let Shakespeare have the last word: "We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy."