

Sermon – Sunday 28th October – 9.30 am

I have a vivid recollection of one of those moments in life when the penny drops and you see something clearly. I was in my early twenties, working for the Civil Service. I enjoyed my job, but the nature of it felt quite patchy. Pieces of work were delegated my way, but sometimes I had to ask for more. I was finding my feet, trying to make sense of how the place worked and my role within it.

And I was surrounded, it seemed, by people who were engaged in hugely important and exciting work. Not only were they always busy, but what they did amounted to coherent projects, strategic thinking. They knew how the place worked; understood their role within it; and what's more it seemed to me that the organisation would struggle to function without them.

Of course you're wise, sensible people, and can guess what happened. That day arrived when I heard someone I worked with closely telling the story of what they were doing, and the penny dropped. The work I was doing could be described in exactly the same clear, focused terms that the people around me seemed to be using. It wasn't that their work was more coherent, or their roles more central than mine. It was simply the way they told it.

As you can imagine, I learnt pretty quickly that in the context of an interview, it makes sense to tell the story in a certain way. People want – and arguably need – to hear about your role in making something happen in order to decide whether you're suitable for a particular job. But what mattered most to me was that sense of being able to see more clearly. Of understanding more fully the stories that my colleagues were telling – what they actually meant.

In our gospel reading this morning we come across Bartimaeus – blind Bartimaeus, as he is often known. Which is ironic, not just because he ends the story with his sight restored, but also because he is a man who sees far more deeply than we might at first think. Bartimaeus is a blind beggar, sitting at the road side, as Jesus is about to walk past on his way out of Jericho. As soon as Bartimaeus knows that it is Jesus, he begins to shout. And, as we've seen before, those around Jesus try to keep him quiet. He's an embarrassment. What would Jesus want to have to do with a blind beggar?

Now, I think we know, don't we, that Jesus chose to mix with the tax collectors and the sinners. Whatever pictures you may have in your head of Jesus, I expect they are of him among the sick, the poor, those on the margins of society. So who is it who really sees clearly? Blind Bartimaeus, who insists on shouting out to Jesus, believing that he won't be ignored? Or those who want to keep Jesus away from him?

Do you notice, too, that Bartimaeus refers to Jesus as Son of David? This is the first time that Son of David as a title is applied to Jesus, and it is by someone who is blind – and yet can see. Because in applying that title, he is recognising something that perhaps others have failed to see. Everyone knew that the Messiah would come from the line of David. And Bartimaeus is putting two and two together.

In crying out to Jesus, Bartimaeus asks for mercy. This, too, shows a depth of understanding. He believes this to be something that Jesus can offer. And, as we have seen before, Jesus silences the dissenting crowd, and calls Bartimaeus over. The crowd, of course, change their tune pretty quickly, as Bartimaeus leaps up, throws off his cloak, and approaches Jesus.

And then we have that wonderful question from Jesus. What do you want me to do for you? I love that question because it demonstrates a desire to listen and understand. Jesus isn't making any assumptions – he wants Bartimaeus to have a chance to speak for himself. If you were here last week you will also know that there is another significance to the question. When James and John, two of Jesus's disciples, approached him last week and asked him to do whatever they asked, this was also what he said to them: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John's response was that they wanted to sit at Jesus's right and left hand in glory. Bartimaeus, by contrast, asks for his sight.

Yet again we find ourselves asking who it is who sees clearly. James and John, the disciples, who want positions of status, when Jesus has repeatedly told his followers that hierarchy should not be the way among them? Or Bartimaeus, who simply asks to see again?

There is one other thing that Bartimaeus sees even before his sight is restored. Everything that he has said indicates that he knows how Jesus is. He refers to him as Son of David; he approaches him, believing that he is merciful; as he approaches, he throws off his cloak, suggesting that he will no longer have need of it. He believes that his sight will be restored, and he will no longer be restricted to the life of a beggar at the side of the road. But because of his faith he also knows what Jesus's disciples find it so hard to accept. He knows the path that Jesus must walk – the road towards Jerusalem. And he has an understanding of what that means. Of Jesus's destiny. When he asks for his sight to be restored, he knows that being a follower of Jesus isn't a guarantee that life will always be easy – and yet he still makes that choice. And, as Jesus says, it is his faith, that deep understanding of who Jesus is and what he stands for, that has made him well.

Today we are celebrating Abigail's baptism – the beginning of her journey of faith. The story of Bartimaeus is so fitting for today because it helps us to engage with that question about what it means to see clearly, and how our faith might play a part in that. In baptism, we recognise that Abigail is called by name, just as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was called by name. That is because Abigail is known by God as a precious individual, who will grow in faith and truth to see things more clearly.

The story of Bartimaeus reminds us of the importance of faith and truth. As parents and godparents and those who love Abigail, you will be helping her to navigate the world. To tell the story of her life as she goes. To seek out truth. By bringing her for baptism, you are acknowledging the importance of God's love, surrounding and guiding you. And recognising, too, that truth is most faithfully sought together.

Amen