

**Sermon for the Last Sunday after Trinity**  
**Sunday 27 October 2024**  
**10.30 Sung Eucharist, Worcester Cathedral**  
*Mark 10. 46-end*

Jesus said to Bartimaeus, 'Does he take sugar?'

Obviously Jesus said no such thing, in fact his question is the more enabling and liberating of questions but it could so easily have been said.

'Does she take sugar? Does he take sugar?' is the classic example which renders able-bodied people unable to speak directly to people with disability. It is both a cliché and a reality. It is cringing at best but mostly it is a damning erasing of identity and presence. It is of course not limited to the disabled and we would not need to ask many people gathered here for examples of when they have been spoken about rather than to, or when their personality, identity or individuality has been overlooked, ignored or deleted.

We hear much about cancel culture at the moment but that is a very different thing – not what I want to talk about this morning. This is about the deliberate, even if sub-conscious, diminishing or erasing of personal experience or status by the one who thinks they hold the power simply because they sit firmly within the majority. Such comfortable positioning by the majority allows those who sit within the norm to think of themselves as normal, and guess what? Those who don't fit in suddenly are seen as not normal.

The normalising of one identity over another has been challenged throughout history but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this gained further ground and the movement has had a significant effect on theology. The liberation theologies around feminism, womanism, black, queer, body and disabled identity speak into a Western tradition which has been predominantly white male clerical voices.

Theological traditions which were brought forth from a liberationist seed are now mainstreamed in a way which is typical of our early 21<sup>st</sup> century culture: the mixed cultural economy is a new norm rather than being restrained by one over-arching narrative; we live with what Professor David Ford, when thinking about the future of theology, describes as 'a diverse ecology of wisdom-seeking'.

It is one of the ironies of the Church that a movement founded in the radical, liberating teaching and ministry of Jesus Christ has over time been dogged by conformity and establishment thinking. Churches – individually and denominational – perform many acts of radical love, radical kindness, and radical service, but the structures and institutional culture is often one of conservative conformity. It is not hard to see this contrasted with the liberating and counter-cultural activity of the Jesus of the gospels.

This past week we heard the news of the death of the Peruvian priest theologian Gustav Gutiérrez whose liberation theology, rooted in Latin American reality, and his writings on the preferential option for the poor, have shaped many churches and individuals of our generation. Like others, Gutiérrez sees in the gospels, in the life of Christ, a radical preference for the marginalised and the poor; it is them that the Kingdom is made visible.

*Nothing about me without me*, is a maxim often heard from those whose voices are not heard. It is a good place from which to start exploring people's needs and it is a fundamental cornerstone of practical theologies, identity theologies, and the basis for what should be our missional and evangelistic ministry as Christians. *We have a gospel to proclaim* but to do so we must also know the lives and experiences, the stories and desires of those to whom we take this good news.

In the gospel proclaimed this morning, Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, and they pass Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, sitting by the roadside. The first reaction is one of silencing him: 'Many sternly ordered him to be quiet'. The sternness no doubt coming from a mix of embarrassment, of frustration, of an unwillingness and even a definite exclusion of this man who was doubly ostracised – as a blind man and as a beggar. 'Many sternly ordered him to be quiet'. I bet they did. We hear the tuts and feel the stares directed at the nuisance.

But he cries out louder, Jesus hears and call him over. Then we are told that 'they' (who 'they' are we are not told) say 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' Now we don't know for sure but it is not improbable that the very same group who were sternly ordering the blind man to shut up and disappear, are also the ones changing their mind because of Jesus's request. It is, as we know, not improbable that wanting Jesus to see and hear them do the 'right thing' is why this group changed their mind.

But it might also be a group who act out of kindness – acting out of pastoral concern but still pushing the blind man forward. There is a sense of him being told what to do: *take* heart, *get* up!

Our actions towards others are rooted in complex cultures but when they are towards those who are seen or cast as being different from us the interactions can be loaded with manipulation or control.

When observing white clergy ministering among black congregations, the Methodist British Black Theologian Anthony Reddie recognised three types of character – each of which is seen in today's gospel. He speaks of the pastoral response which, on the surface appears to be kindly and caring, and yet often manifests in the white minister imposing a compliance which is hard to challenge: what looks pastoral turns out to be weak.

The next type Reddie identifies is the institutional or organisational approach which uses the full power of white privilege to impose its result. Again it can appear neat and immediate and even geared towards change, but its dominance denies any opportunity to challenge it, and opportunity to make a difference. It denies the individuality and the identity of the one it is supposed to support.

Lastly he speaks of a third way and it is this third way which we see in Jesus's reaction to the blind beggar. Jesus asks the very ones who had silenced Bartimaeus to bring him to him – the first oppressors become the audience for the miracle. And Jesus, fully present to this man, asks him 'What do you want me to do for you?'

The man is addressed directly. The man is addressed as a man not a beggar or a blind person. The man is given choice and opportunity. The man is given dignity.

Attitudes towards people with particular needs or characteristics have changed enormously over time but there are huge strides still to make. On one level issues around accessibility and inclusion are very practical and as a Cathedral we have commissioned an access audit – the first fruits of which will be seen in the College Yard development, and when we move to other parts of the building we shall be better prepared. But alongside the practical and physical implications, for the Church there is a deeper and fundamental need to think about inclusion from a Gospel perspective.

Bartimaeus represents more than the blind beggar that he is. He represents the need for justice towards those who are marginalised, those who are erased, those who are ignored. Jesus places him at the centre - as he so often places the marginalised, erased or ignored at the heart of his ministry.

The question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' has a very definite physical outcome: Bartimaeus regains his sight. But the fuller message for the Church is that it is the blind beggar who, rich in faith, leads the way.

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