

Lent 5 – Two blind men meet Jesus

TURN TO NEIGHBOUR: What's been the most surprising thing you've found about being a Christian? (or if not sure if you are: about what you've seen so far)

- For me: Could be the joy that service brings (more blessed to give than receive)
- Or the mystery of prayer – how sometimes one small prayer for something yields a spectacular answer but sometimes decades of prayer for something else seems to yield little obvious fruit. (Often more than realise, but you know what I mean).
- Perhaps biggest is this – how **God is at work in surprising places**.

Where is the country with the fastest growing church in world – by percentage, not sheer numbers? (NEIGHBOUR) IRAN. Estimated as many as a million believers, certainly hundreds of thousands. This despite the fact that: (Christian Today article) 'Christians in Iran face relentless persecution. Ranked ninth on Open Doors' list of countries where it's most dangerous to be a Christian, open churches are forbidden, and converting from Islam – the state religion – is punishable by death for men, and life imprisonment for women. In 2014 more than 100 Christians were arrested or imprisoned and allegations of torture have emerged.' Yet evangelical church is growing at 20% a year – i.e. doubling every 4 years.

Seen this myself in my own journey of faith. Where have I seen greatest hunger for God? (ASK) PRISON – visited weekly for 2 years in 2001-02. Helped run 3 Alpha courses and then a discipleship group for 2nd year. People were desperate – what's going to stop me coming back? Don't need to tell a prisoner they have a problem with sin! Only Alpha course with waiting list to get on (took 24/ wanted by 52). Dozens came to faith, miracles were commonplace.

Takes us back to our Lent passages from Matthew 19-21. Jesus keeps repeating this line: '**First last and last first**'. What does he mean by that? Jesus' kingdom turns everything upside down. People you don't expect are welcome, while respectable and self-satisfied are disappointed. 'Jesus came to comfort disturbed and disturb comfortable.' Or to put it another way, the first shall be last and the last first.

Today's story a great example of that. Jesus is on last leg of 100+ mile journey to Jerusalem. Now surrounded by great crowds, left last major town (Jericho) to cover the 20 or so miles to Jerusalem. Time for him to focus for big events coming up, to save his energy, marshall his support – or is it? 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!' Another interruption. 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!' Here are the last, in every way – the last to meet Jesus, the last encounter on the journey, and the last socially – blind, destitute, reliant on handouts. What does Jesus do?

We know what the crowd thinks – 'shut up, tramp!' Jesus has got more important things to do. The messiah has a Roman occupation to overthrow. He needs to be in Jerusalem by tomorrow night or...

Amazing how they can be listening to all this teaching, but miss the visual aid right in front of them. **Who's first in Jesus' kingdom?**

'Familiarity breeds contempt.' True then, and true now. So easy for all of us used to sitting in church to tame or sanitise the message. To miss the point. We can hear *ourselves* in the crowd. Another hard luck case, another problem to manage.

I think Matthew sees the irony. I'm sure Jesus healed many of blindness, but why does he include this one now? I think he understands the visual aid. Who is first and who is last? Or more specifically, who are those who really see Jesus? It's not those with physical sight. The shock of this story is that it's the blind men who see Jesus for who he really is: Lord and King (Son of David). How many others have got that far in the gospels?

Brother Andrew prayer: 'Make blind see and seeing eyes blind'. Illustration here – the blind see and those with sight are still blind.

That challenges me: **do I still see Jesus for who he really is?** Or are my spiritual eyes starting to fail? Is my view of Jesus just an amalgam of other people's interpretations? Or unhelpful images? Or jazzy soundbites to help me remember? No substitute for going back to gospels. Don't mean here on Sunday morning for a snippet (important as that is) – maybe word for us today is to open our bibles at home this week and read one of the gospels, to just get the pure unfiltered word of God, the life of Jesus jumping from the pages. (MY EG?) To let it provoke us, astonish us, inspire us – maybe to shout out like the blind men: Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!

Challenged by something else – something which precedes the amazing spiritual sight of the blind men – **their hunger to meet Jesus.** This was probably their one chance – and boy did they take it! I'm humbled by their persistence, ignoring the crowds and shouting until they were heard. I recognise it in the hunger I saw in prison. The alpha course was some of those men's one chance to meet Jesus, and they were going to take it. The 'last' have a hunger which shocks the 'first'.

The fact that we can turn up here on any Sunday, whenever we like can make us complacent. But I wonder if you've ever wondered what it would be like to have it taken away? If you were in Iran and to meet was dangerous? If a bible was hard to get your hands on? Jesus knew what he meant by the 'first last and last first'. There's a hunger among the 'last' which challenges those of us who are 'first'. But Jesus always responds to those who are hungry for him. 'What do you want me to do for you?' Psalm 37: 'Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.' Your desire of course being for more of God. That's a prayer Jesus loves to answer.

God is often most at work in surprising places and surprising people. Which is good news for us! No harm to have the mentality of seeing yourself as one of the surprising people He is at work in.

Also good news for MK. Church life often been a struggle here. But there's a lot of new life happening at the moment. Many churches are growing, new ones are starting, and Bishop Steven is looking at MK as a key priority for more resources. Who knows? Perhaps MK will one day be known as a surprising place where God did extraordinary things! Because God loves to work in surprising places and surprising people. Where the hungry are fed. Where the blind see. Where the first are last and last are first. 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!'