

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

(b-os30)

28th October 2018

Readings: Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34: 1-8;
Hebrews 7: 20b-28; Mark 10: 46b-52.

"The Blind See"

Seeing, When All Around Are Blind

An old saying goes: "There are none so blind as those who will not see", which is to say that those who choose to be wilfully ignorant, by knowing the truth on the one hand but still refusing to accept it on the other, will never come to understand how the world works, or how to live their lives, or manage change, or even receive freedom.

The idea of 'seeing' is often used as a metaphor for understanding. Mark's Gospel hinges around what is called 'Peter's Confession', when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter replies "You are the Messiah!". This was a moment of spiritual insight for Peter – that an "Ah ha!" moment when he could clearly see who Jesus was.

It is at this point the Gospel narrative takes a dramatic turn; for it is from this point that Jesus begins to make his way to Jerusalem and ultimately his death. Immediately before Peter's Confession is the story of Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida. The link between healing and insight is not accidental. The healings in Mark's Gospel are signs of the Kingdom of God, and are descriptive of an encounter with God that brings understanding and transformation.

Today's reading is set in Jericho, the last town that Jesus visited before heading up the mountain road to Jerusalem. It is here that Jesus gives yet another sign of the Kingdom by healing the blind man, Bartimaeus.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" he cried. Interestingly, Bartimaeus could see who Jesus was, even when those who were around him could not understand. Bartimaeus had spiritual insight and named Jesus as Messiah by giving him the title 'Son of David'.

Jesus responded by asking “What do you want?” the same question that was put to James and John just previously in the narrative, when they asked for the seats of honour in God’s Kingdom. The contrast here is that Bartimaeus (an outcast) asked in humility. Bartimaeus understood, whereas James and John asked ignorantly, out of their desire for status and power.

Seeing is Believing

There is also a link with the apostle Thomas who doubted Jesus’ resurrection until he could see for himself. It is from this that we coined the phrase ‘seeing is believing’. As I have said, we often equate ‘seeing’ with ‘understanding’, and the symbol that is often used to remind ourselves of such understanding is a lit candle or lamp (or some other sort of light); for, when we are ‘in the light’ we can see where we are going.

At a baptism we give the newly baptised person a lit candle to remind them that Christ is the light of the world; and so, it is through the presence of Christ that we gain spiritual understanding and can therefore find meaning and purpose because we can ‘see where we are going’.

The blind man Bartimaeus could see the truth because he had insight, while others around him were spiritually blind. He could see that Jesus was the Messiah, not through what he could physically touch or see, but through the eyes of faith.

Nevertheless, as the story recounts, upon receiving his physical sight he decided to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus could do what the rich young man, whom we heard about two weeks ago, could not do; for Bartimaeus left his past behind and followed Jesus.

It is through faith that we can see and understand the sign and presence of the Kingdom of God, and by it we gain spiritual insight.

Moving Beyond our Blindness

Just as many around Jesus were blinded by their personal needs, expectations and desires, we too can be blind to God’s presence. There are many things that can cause this, such as:

- Wilful ignorance,
- Bigotry and arrogance,
- Fear of rejection, conflict, or loss of control, and
- Selfish desire for power, privilege and money.

Yet, whatever it is that holds us back from fully following Christ, it can be left behind, as Bartimaeus demonstrated.

Moreover, spiritual blindness can be both individual and corporate. We can see it in the community through our ideas about, and treatment of the marginalised – be they the poor and homeless, refugees, the abused, indigenous people, and those with whom we disagree or dislike.

There were several examples of this in the past two weeks at the Sydney Diocesan Synod in which some proposed policies had the effect of singling out some minority groups for exclusion from the services of the church. It made the church look like an elitist religious club rather than a group of people on pilgrimage with Christ to the Kingdom of God.

There is a need to be vigilant in our seeing which is based on a desire to look past the obvious to what lies beyond into the mystery of life. This is part of the spiritual discipline of prayer and meditation by which we ask God to open our eyes to see the presence of God's Spirit. It is like what I remember the field training staff saying when I was in the Army: "You need to learn to see through the trees!", which is beyond the obvious to what lies behind.

We can recognise the presence of the Kingdom of God when we recognise our need for Jesus who brings healing and transformation. By following him, and shaping our lives on his life, we can change and 'see' the world in a new and spiritual way.

In this service of Eucharist (or Thanksgiving), we seek to experience the loving and forgiving presence of Christ through the sharing of the narrative of God's people in the Word, and the receiving of God's presence in the bread and wine of the Sacrament. These signs or symbols embody for us the greater purpose that God calls us to perform, and that is to work with him in the reconciliation of the world.

God comes to us in the Sacrament and then sends us out to be sacrament to the world. This must be done in all humility, for it is not a process that we manipulate for our own purposes, but rather an offering of ourselves in God's service. By this we become the means for others to see the resurrected Christ through us.