

Bartimaeus

New Disciples

Based on an address at St Andrew's Sneyd Green – 7 April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot

Mark 10.46-52

This is well-known as a story of healing, but it is also the story of somebody becoming a new disciple. There can be many factors and motivations in somebody's decision to become a disciple; here we see them working out in a real story of hope and change.

The narrative as presented by Mark is particularly vivid and specific, with a wealth of individual detail which feels as if it was written by an eye-witness – or at least by somebody who heard the story from Bartimaeus himself.

The name Bartimaeus is recorded only by Mark, and is absent from Matthew and Luke's gospels; probably he was a character in, or known to, Mark's church. 'Bartimaeus' as a name is a hybrid of Aramaic and Greek, so it seems that he had a dual heritage. This in turn gives us a pointer to how mixed the early church could be: Bartimaeus was probably welcomed into a diverse community.

This is a story of healing, and at the same time it is a story of discipleship. Bartimaeus follows Jesus 'on the way' (verse 52) – surely referring not just to the physical road, but to the Christian way of life. This is the language of discipleship as understood in first-century Judaism, where students would literally walk after their rabbi. The passage is usually seen as a typical miracle story, yet the gift received is greater even than any physical healing: 'your faith has made you well', Jesus says - discipleship is itself a kind of miracle, which depends on the faith which opened Bartimaeus' eyes.

All is not easy for Bartimaeus, though. Being blind is in some sense a guarantee of being supported by those around him. We should notice how in verse 48 those around him order him to be quiet. Maybe they have been exploiting his lucrative begging, profiting from his trade. In any case, Bartimaeus is clearly speaking out when should remain silent in his place. It takes courage for him to leave behind his security; this is perhaps why Jesus asks him to articulate what it is that he wants (verse 51) – he has to own for himself the disturbing gift he is seeking. In three short verbal forms, those standing around exhort him (verse 49): 'Take heart'; 'Get up'; 'He is calling you'.

As well as healing, this is also a story of resurrection. The crowd say to Bartimaeus, literally 'Rise up', and he then addresses Jesus as *Rabbouni* – the same very title with which Mary Magdalene addresses the risen Lord on Easter morning (in fact, the word is found only in these two places in the New Testament). As in John 20, the Lord then moves on and, like Mary,

Bartimaeus must not cling on to him, but rather be content to travel behind him. In a sense, this scene mirrors Mary's encounter from the other side of the Passion: it is Mark's last story before Jesus enters Jerusalem, and so it teaches that becoming a disciple leads right into the heart of our redemption.

When Bartimaeus is called, he flings off his cloak (verse 50): he rises up without the grave clothes of his old life, coming in total trust to Jesus as even less than a beggar, bringing nothing at all with him, except for his faith. Then, at the very end there is a final twist: as he enters this new life, Jesus says to him: 'Go!', apparently sending him away. However, he chooses rather to follow his Lord. This is true discipleship, wanting to stay close to Jesus even when told to depart. Becoming a disciple transforms the whole of a person's life, and it is a call which can only be received as a gift from God, requiring courage to accept, and leading first to the cross and then to the reality of a new life.

Do we recognise how much courage it takes to be a disciple?

Do we see that discipleship leads to new life in Jesus' company?