

Sermon Mark 10: 46-52 Blind Bartimaeus

Way way way back when I was just seven or eight years old my favourite television show was The Gemini Man. The Gemini Man was a spy but more importantly he had a watch that could make him invisible, but only for fifteen minutes at a time. What I would have given for a watch that would make me invisible. The things I could have done. Every time that Apple releases a new product I watch just in case they have finally mastered an invisibility app. Church councils and circuit meetings watch out!

Our story this morning is also about an invisible man, blind Bartimaeus a beggar sitting at the gates of Jericho as the pilgrims pass by. The story itself is a bridge bringing to an end the themes of the last two chapters of Mark's gospel and offering us a powerful image as we transition into the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. I want to focus this morning on the story as it ends chapters nine and ten. These chapters have been about power. Challenging our preconceptions, challenging those disciples who think they should be in charge, placing before them a very simple but uncomfortable and much disliked teaching. If you want to receive the kingdom says Jesus become like one of these, one of the powerless, one with no claim or entitlement to anything.

We'd like to think that they got the message somewhere over the course of the last two chapters but as our story opens James and John have just been bidding for places at the top table and here as Jesus walks through Jericho the crowd do their best to obscure and drown out the voice of Bartimaeus one of the powerless a man who can be safely ignored. Yet Jesus, amidst all the noise and busyness stops and hears. Bartimaeus is one of the invisible people, one of the powerless, the ones of no account, someone who can safely be shushed and scolded one who is not important enough to be taken seriously. Yet Jesus stops and listens.

Our story then, first of all points us simply and directly to the invisible people in our world. Hidden by noise, busyness, good intentions and carefully conceived programmes. Such invisibility is growing, indeed it seems in a time of austerity that it is almost contagious. Young people with mental health needs slip through nets of community care and get lost in the dark places of our cities. Elderly men and women disappear into care homes if they are lucky. More and more take refuge in alcohol, food, drugs in an attempt to find a foothold and be seen as real and worthy.

It is these invisible people that are at the heart of West London Mission and the work it has tried and continues to try and do alongside them. In the midst of the busyness and noise of a capital city it is our task to say first and foremost these people exist, these people matter, they have worth value, they have names, histories, they have a story that needs to be told.

If our work begins with a basic but profound commitment to honouring the invisible people in our midst it continues as we seek to make the invisible visible. Such a role has so many dimensions. At one extreme we may need to teach the invisible that they are real, tangible and of value, at the other we need to remind the powers that be that they are increasingly blind and often straightforwardly immoral. Between these two poles lies a massive practical work, the day to day challenges of reconciliation and healing and justice in a thousand small details and real life situations. Discovered in forms to be filled in, skills to be learnt and arguments to be won. The technical theological term for this is incarnation, word and words made flesh amidst day centres and doorways, amidst coffee cups and simple conversation a sacramental narration and enactment that makes an invisible grace into a visible and tangible reality.

As Friends of the West London Mission you too are invisible people of course, that invisible army of support, encouragement, prayer, goodwill and of course money. An invisible army that is spread across the country and provides a strong and very necessary support. Because this work is exceptionally hard. Seeing and serving those who do not exist according to the official story is difficult and demanding work not least as more and more are caricatured and stereotyped still worse erased from our civic life and story.

Yet our bible story and the work of West London Mission does not end here however. Bartimaeus stands at this boundary position in our text to serve as our example. This invisible man is not just named but becomes a symbol and a challenge to those who should have known better. The one without rights who knows how to approach Jesus when disciples are deceived by ambition and bid for promotion in the cabinet to come, the one who follows in gratitude for that that he receives while others wonder if the cost is too much to pay. Unless says Jesus you receive the kingdom like one of these, like a child, like Bartimaeus you will not enter the kingdom. The invisible person then is not just to be understood as the recipient of our mercy but as the one who teaches us and shows us the way to enter the kingdom.

In this story then we asked again to wrestle with the sense of entitlement, power and prerogative that threatens to disable and derail our discipleship, to discover in our commitment of service that we are net receivers not net givers. Surprised by blessing again and again as Bartimaeus and those who walk with him show us the way forward and which turns out to be, just as Jesus said, the only way to enter the kingdom.

Days such as this are about invisible people. We are reminded of those for whom this mission came into being and still works today. Likewise we call to mind and give thanks for that invisible army of friends who support and treasure this ongoing work. I cannot close without remembering that greater cloud of witnesses in whose seats we sit and in whose footsteps we follow. Such memories are both challenge and privilege, blessing and grace. In such a world of witnesses who needs a clever watch? Amen