

## **Sermon preached at Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Pietermaritzburg | 29 October 2018**

### **Mark 10.46-52**

*46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' <sup>48</sup>Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' <sup>49</sup>Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' <sup>50</sup>So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' <sup>52</sup>Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

Greetings from the Methodist Church in Britain and from Wesley House Cambridge.

My name is Jane Leach, I am the Principal of that College and I first visited RSA in 2005 as part of a partnership with John Wesley College in Pretoria. When I visited plans were being made for the new college here and so I was pleased to visit SMMS, ten years later in 2015. And it is a great pleasure to be back here with you now and to share in worship here and it is a great privilege to be asked to preach. I have been immensely enriched by my association with theological education in South Africa; by South Africa students and staff with whom I have worked both here in RSA and in the UK. I want you to know that as our partner institution we pray for you every Thursday in Cambridge at our weekly Eucharist. Today it is a great joy to pray with you in person.

We live in different hemispheres. In some ways we inhabit very different worlds. But in other respects we have much in common. We are Methodist people. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are human beings made in the image of God – people who laugh and weep; who bleed and dream; who together search for wisdom.

So let us turn to our common texts and seek for wisdom together, asking God to speak to us, his people. In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit.

So we turn to the story of Jesus' meeting with the blind man at Jericho. A blind man who wants to see again. A blind man who is known – who has a name – Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, yet a blind man who is used to being ignored unless he shouts out... begging for food and money so that he can live.

One of the first things that interests me about this story is the link between seeing and being seen... Bartimaeus, like Zaccheus, wants to see Jesus but he also needs Jesus to see him so that he might heal him and help him to see. In order to get Jesus to notice him Bartimaeus cries out, Son of David, have mercy on me' but the crowds are annoyed as crowds get annoyed with beggars everywhere... stop making me pay attention to you and your shame. Stop making me pay attention to the gap between what I have and what you need. Stop making me see you. So the crowd tell Bartimaeus to shut up.

But Bartimaeus needs to be seen. And so he shouts all the louder. And Jesus, hearing the commotion tells the crowd to call him to come.

I've been in Africa this past couple of weeks. I have been visiting Africa University in Zimbabwe and the global hub of the UMC in Maputo before coming to Johannesburg for the joint Conference of the Methodist Theological Institutions in Africa and the Methodist Related Higher Education Institutions. I have therefore been flying about on South African airlines and reading their inflight magazine called Sawubona. Understanding that Sawubona is a greeting and knowing that in different languages greetings have various meanings I looked up this isiZulu word and was interested to discover that Sawubona means in English, something like, 'I see you.' And it struck me how significant a greeting that is... for someone to acknowledge that they see us is to acknowledge that we exist; that we are a person; that we deserve the space to live; the time of day; to be treated with the fully dignity of a human being. And if you have ever been ignored or treated as if you were invisible you will know the power of being alone in a crowd or in a strange community or a strange country and someone smiling at you or speaking to you or offering you a drink for what they are doing as they do these things is saying, 'I see you.'

Now if I were to say to you, 'Sawubona' the appropriate response I understand would be Ngikhona' which in English is something like, 'I am here.' If you see me and admit that you see me, you confer identity on me. I know that I exist for you and it helps me to claim the fact that I do really exist, that I am; that I matter. That I have a place. It is not that your seeing me tells me who I am or what I am, but that I am and that I have a right to be.

Now let us return to the text.

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Notice the energy in the springing up! Notice the life that comes into Bartimaeus as he realises he has been seen. Notice the encouragement – literally the giving of courage to him that comes through the acknowledgement of his existence because Jesus has seen him, the courage to stand up and answer, 'I am here.'

Imagine, you sit day after day. You call out day after day. You beg to be noticed. To belong. To have a place. You dream that your sight will return so that you will no longer have to beg; no longer be dependent on other people conferring you place; but be able to find your own way; to find work; to support yourself; to be someone.

And then it happens. Jesus of Nazareth passes by and you shout. And the people who ignore you or throw you scraps or tolerate your existence day to day; the people whom you struggle to get to notice you and help you, do what they always do, They tell you to shut up... and perhaps out of desperation at being so alone and oppressed, in the face of this unexpected opportunity you make yourself should again.... And suddenly, unexpectedly, joyously, terrifyingly you find yourself in front of Jesus saying, 'I am here.'

Now our attention normally shoots forward to the miracle of Bartimaeus regaining his sight... but I do not want us to pass over the first miracle in this story... the miraculous transformation that comes from being seen.

Marina Abramovic is a performance artist. Now you or I may or may not be a fan of performance art as art... but this performance I find very telling... from March to May 2010 Marina Abrahmovic performed a solo silent opera in New York. Every day for 7 hours six days a week she sat in a large auditorium facing an empty chair and invited the audience to take it in turns to sit opposite her. In complete silence she should look at them and hold their gaze and give them her full attention. Close to 1400 people came and sat in that chair over the course of 2 months. Many simply sat and wept at the power of someone who was willing to see them. Not to look at them in cold detachment, not to judge them or label them or put them in a box, but really to see them, giving them space to get in touch with who they are and what they might deeply need.

Bartimaeus is unexpectedly called out of the crowd to stand before Jesus. And Jesus says, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And of course what Mark is telling us is not simply that Jesus of Nazareth one day said to a blind beggar, 'What do you want me to do for you?' but that God in Christ says to each of us here and each human being on the earth if we could only filter out all the other voices and listen... God in Christ says to each of us, black, white, coloured, Indian, women, men, straight, gay, old, young, poor rich, 'I see you.' Sawubona. 'What do you want me to do for you?'

Maya Angelou, was an African American writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She said, 'When people tell you who *they* are. Believe them.' 'When people try to tell you who *you* are... do not believe them.' There are many people in the world who think they know who we are. Who want to label us and box us in and tell us our place and tell us how to be – do not listen to them – do not listen to people who want to tell you who or what you are – rather listen to those who will you at you and listen for you and see you. And who will ask you who ask you who and what you really need.

What do you want me to do for you? Jesus says to Bartimaeus. And, I guess Bartimaeus could have bottled out of saying what he really wanted. He could have asked for a lesser thing. He could have asked Jesus for money. He could have asked Jesus for food. But because Jesus sees him and sees into him and loves him, Bartimaeus has the courage to look into himself and find for what he really wholeheartedly wants... because Jesus sees him and calls him forward Bartimaeus can find the courage to open himself to the possibility of healing and new life. And in that moment the second miracle happens... his faith saves him... the block of his blindness is removed and his sight returns.

Life can blind us to what we really need to see. And what is it that we really need to see? That without exception or condition we are beloved children of God.

I see you, says Jesus. What do you want me to do for you?

Many of you are preparing for ordained or licensed ministry. This year I celebrated 20 years of ordained life. It can be a tough calling. This life can squash us, flatten us, drain away our life force... and it is so important that we keep on coming back to the place where we can hear God in Christ calling us and saying to us, 'I see you.... What do you want me to do for you.' It is so important to keep coming back to that place where we can hear that voice.

Bartimaeus heard that voice in Jericho. And I find that interesting... what else do we know about Jericho?

- It is where the people crossed over the Jordan into the promised land...
- It is where the walls came tumbling down after Joshua had encircled them for 7 days.
- It is where the spirit of Elijah came to rest on Elisha.
- It is the city of palm trees and the place of rose bushes.

I was at a party last weekend in Mutare, Zimbabwe. And it was a party in honour of a United Methodist Bishop from America who had raised a lot of money in her Conference – one of the poorest Conferences in the United States - to build a retreat centre at Africa University. And she told the story of how difficult it had been to raise that money and how there were many blocks in the road where she might have turned back because she could not see the way forward. And at one of these crossroads she was visiting the university and came to chapel and the children from the orphanage on the compound opposite were leading the service and a 12 year old boy was preaching on the battle of Jericho when the walls came tumbling down... and the phrase he kept on using was, 'It's only a wall.' And Bishop Laurie Haller thought, 'its only a wall.'

There are lots of things in life that become blocks in the road that prevent us from seeing. There are lots of things in life that can be blocks in the road that prevent others from seeing. There is no block more powerful than the blindness that prevents us seeing ourselves as a beautiful creature made in the image of God. and no healing more powerful , more courage giving, more energising than the healing that comes from knowing ourselves seen and loved.

It strikes me as surprising that we know the name of Bartimaeus. That Mark knew it and preserved it. No-one knows the names of beggars because we do not really see them... so how is it that we still 2000 years on know this man's name? I think because once he could see... he chose to follow Jesus on the way of setting other people free. That's how we know his name. He became one of those early disciples.

Now as then. Once you can see... once you can see that you are a beloved child of God because God in Christ has seen you - your job is to help others know that they are seen – to help liberate them from the self-hate and despair that blocks their sight and prevents them hearing God in Christ saying to them, Sawubona . Such blocks are only a wall. And walls can come tumbling down....

So as God in Christ says to you, 'I see you.' With Bartimaeus, throw off your cloak and spring up and find the courage to answer, 'I am here' 'To open yourself to the possibility that God might really love you' and then follow Christ on the way of bringing sight to all who need to know that they too are not invisible, but are God's beloved.