

SERMON AT ST MICHAEL'S – OCTOBER 25th 2015.
The Revd. Father W.C. Wilson.

Bartimaeus followed Jesus εν τη οδω.

Along the road.

Not so remarkable, you might think.

But the gospel writer isn't concerned just to relate an episode from the ministry of Jesus.

He writes with a purpose.

The road is not only the road to Jerusalem where Jesus will suffer and die.

It is also the Way of christian discipleship.

The disciples of Jesus had been very slow to recognise what was going on.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah on the holy mountain hadn't convinced them about Jesus.

In spite of the fact that prophecy stated quite clearly that the Messiah would be preceded by their reappearance, they were almost impervious to the truth.

And as they moved on their progress was blighted by arguments about who was the greatest.

It was as if they expected to be swept into Jerusalem on a wave of popular acclaim, their leader enthroned as king of the new Israel.

It's no accident that this part of the gospel began with the healing of a blind man.

As we move towards journey's end a blind man again receives his sight and, full of joy, follows Jesus.

We could, I suppose, simply take this as the activity of a wandering miracle worker:

Jesus goes everywhere doing good and leaves behind him a collection of healthy and happy people.

But no.

He himself goes on to suffering and death.

The truth he comes to proclaim isn't so much about health and well-being in this life, though both of those are desirable.

It is about God, who in this man Jesus takes on human form and invites all to follow him through suffering and death into the life that knows no end.

So the story isn't merely about the healing of physical blindness.

It tells of the healing of christological blindness – what stops people recognising Jesus for who he really is.

The miracle is the realisation of who this is and of the demands of discipleship.

The others couldn't see this, but Bartimaeus was willing to follow simply because of who Jesus was, regardless of the consequences.

So that's why Bartimaeus is given a name.

The other two synoptic Gospels don't name him.

Mark does, and this may be because Bartimaeus belonged to an early christian community, perhaps at Jericho, that first shaped the story.

So really the story is more about the nature of our discipleship than about the healing of a blind man.

And as you look at it you can point to things and connect them with the road along which we are invited.

He may have been blind and a beggar, but this man had a genuine desire for the Messiah.

He must have heard the prophecies, and the passage from Jeremiah celebrating the return of the Israelites from the exile in Babylon to the promised land: *With them, the blind and the lame, women with child, women in labour, all together: a mighty throng will return here!*

But more than that he must have known that passage from Isaiah where a sign of the coming of the Messiah was that the deaf would hear, the blind see and the lame walk.

He must have known too that the Messiah would be a descendant of David.

‘Son of David! Jesus, have pity on me.

A burning desire for this man, in whom he recognised the fulfilment of all the hopes of humanity and the warmth of God’s own desire for his people.

How cool our response to Jesus as he walks by!

How indifferent we are to the constant outpouring of his love, his abiding presence.

That desire needs to be fanned into flame, so that we want nothing more than to be with Christ.

Would we be able to voice our desire for him, and if we did, would people scold us and tell us to keep quiet?

Jesus endorses the recognition by calling Bartimaeus.

The response is immediate and dramatic.

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and goes to Jesus.

In fact he leaves behind the only bit of security a man in his position would have.

It would serve as a blanket at night, and during the day when he was begging he would be sitting on it.

But he left it.

How much are we prepared to leave behind to follow Jesus?

Are we able to see that this call is more important than anything else in our whole existence, and have we the faith to take the risk of responding?

The reward of faith – *your faith has saved you* – is the restoration of his sight.

And yet he already saw.

His faith shone out as soon as he heard Jesus approach.

The healing is vindication, the battle for his commitment already won.

How often do we make our discipleship conditional?

How often do we try and bribe God with promises of loyalty?

And how often is the miracle denied because our faith is so weak?

Bartimaeus had faith from the start.

The arrival of the one he desired meant that faith led him to take risks.

And the ultimate risk was to follow Jesus εν τη οδω - along the road.

That was the biggest risk of all.

For Jesus it meant death.

And death too to most of the people who would admit to being his friends.

Perhaps Bartimaeus was martyred.

Following Jesus brings danger, but that was not an issue to the man who had been blind.

He could now see who Jesus was and nothing mattered to him more than being with him.

In less fraught times being a follower of Jesus brings less obvious dangers.

But there are dangers and they tend to be psychological rather than physical.

We hold ourselves up to questioning and ridicule if we admit to belonging to the Church, and our scale of priorities can set us against the people we love.

The very giving up of our time for God, especially the duty of worship really can present us with difficult choices.

I'm not so bothered about the issues where christians might take a stand.

So much of that is a grey area these days.

What matters is what we think of God, of how God is in relation to us, what God might require of us in the way we use our time, our skills and our money.

The revelation of the true nature of christian discipleship comes not simply from our attitude to conservation or to human rights, worthy as these causes might be.

Christians are recognised by their closeness to the God of Jesus, and by their willingness to accept the risks of following someone who lived two millennia ago, who died as a criminal and whose followers fled when he was arrested.

The miracle for us is that this same Jesus still calls us.

May our hearts burn with such desire for him that the miracle of recognition takes us on to new risks as with Bartimaeus we follow Jesus along the road.