

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 57”**

***Matthew 20:29-34***

If you've been coming along here on Sunday mornings for any length of time, you'll know that we are gradually making our way through Matthew's Gospel, looking at what he has to tell us about the life of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah who had come to fulfil the promises and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and to usher in the Kingdom of God, the sovereign rule of God over all creation as God restored it to the state he originally intended. Matthew's first readers were Jewish people who wanted to follow Jesus, but weren't sure if that would mean betraying their Jewish heritage and faith. Matthew has been at pains to show that Jesus is actually the fulfilment of their faith, the One whom they been expecting for centuries and that comes over once again in the passage we've just read.

But you'll also have noticed that we have jumped over a couple of sections of this Gospel this morning. Instead of following on from last week's passage at the beginning of chapter 19, we've hopped into chapter 20. That's because these little episodes which make up chapters 19 and 20 are a selection of little stories which don't necessarily have to be taken in the order in which they're written: there's no logical progression to them. And as the next section we should have taken is to do with Jesus' attitudes to children, we're going to keep that for a couple of weeks' time when we have an infant dedication service, and the passage we've just read is one which fits in with the healing theme of our service this morning.

So we come across Jesus approaching Jerusalem on his journey down from Galilee to meet his destiny on the cross of Golgotha. Jericho is just a few miles from Jerusalem and as Jesus leaves the city with his disciples on the last leg of that journey, he is hailed by a couple of blind men who are there in the crowd at the gate of the city. There is some historical evidence that Jericho was a centre for the treatment of blind people because of a particular plant which grew nearby, so they may have been there for that, or they may simply have been a couple of men who lived in or near the city. Anyway, these two men – if they were blind they would almost certainly have been begging, the only way for them to survive, and the gate was the best place to be for begging – no doubt hear the noise of the crowds and ask what's going on. We assume that they must have been told something about Jesus, or they've heard rumours about his ministry already, because they begin to call out to him using the Messianic title of “*Son of David*”. And they call out with a desperate plea for help: “*have mercy on us!*”

This kind of behaviour doesn't go down too well with the crowd. It may be that they were anxious to hear all that Jesus was saying, or that they had got a bit fed up with these two beggars constantly calling out for help to anyone, or that they just didn't like the tone of the place being lowered, but they try to shut them up. That only encourages them to call out even more and eventually Jesus stops and addresses them with a direct question. What do they want? What do they really want? Now, they could have asked for

money – presumably that was what they usually asked for. They could have asked for strength to bear their disability or for help in coping with its effects. They could have asked for a bit more understanding from their fellow citizens. But their ambitions are not limited by what would normally seem possible: they want their sight back. They want to be healed.

And Jesus is moved by their appeal. It's that word again – he “*had compassion on them.*” The Greek word is *splanchnizomai*, based on the word *splanchnon* which means “intestines”. This is that “gut-wrenching compassion” that Jesus so often displays when he sees people whose lives are blighted by disease, disadvantage or despair. He wants to do something. He wants to give these men – and the crowd of frustrated bystanders – a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, a peep into what it's like to be able to live life to the full, as God wants. So he reaches out and touches their eyes. Sorry – another quick bit of Greek. The word Matthew uses here is a very poetic word for “eyes”, used only a couple of times in the New Testament. It's a word – *omma* – which is often used to refer to the eyes of the soul or a particular perspective on things. We might use in the sense of “looking at the world with new eyes”, for example.

Of course, these two men are physically healed. Matthew tells us that “*they received their sight*”. They could see what was a round them again. But there was also a sense in which they were able to look at life afresh. They had a new take on things. Life would never be the same for them again. And they wanted to follow Jesus. Their lives had been transformed by this traveling preacher and healer and now they wanted to go with him. How far they went, we'll never know, but this was, for them, a life-changing event.

Now, in the context of this morning's opportunity to offer prayer for healing, there are a few comments to make about these two men and their encounter with Jesus. Once again, let me preface those comments by saying that all Jesus' healings are different – the people are different, their situations and needs are different, the ways in which Jesus approaches them and heals them are different. We can't look at this one story and extrapolate from it a definitive formula for healing. But there are still some things we can learn from it which may encourage or challenge us in our on situations.

Firstly, these men **were not discouraged by the attitudes of others**. They knew what they wanted and they somehow believed that Jesus could deliver that. No doubt they had been at the gates of Jericho for a while and many of the people were used to them being there – getting in the way, shouting out, pestering people for money. So when they started up again at Jesus, everyone told them to shut up. “We know what's wrong. You don't have to keep on about it. Jesus won't be bothered with you. You'll never get better, so don't bother.” But they kept on asking until Jesus responded. There was a persistence in their request that we have seen Jesus commend elsewhere.

It may be that you have been struggling with something for a long time and nothing seems to be happening. Other people might be getting weary of you going on about it. But Jesus doesn't see things from that same perspective. He has compassion on all who suffer and this morning might be the occasion when you do get a response from him. Don't be discouraged by other people or by what seems to be the result of experience. Keep praying. Keep asking.

Secondly, these two men **were specific in their request**. I reckon Jesus' question to the two men is the very heart of this story this morning. Jesus asked the men "*What do you want me to do for you?*" He gave them the opportunity to say exactly what the problem was. As we've already said, they could have said all kinds of things which might have had a short-term effect on the problem, but they wanted to be healed. They wanted their sight back. They wanted their ability to choose how to live their lives back again. All that they did up until that time had been limited by that disability. They wanted to be able to live as God wanted them to. It wasn't their fault they were like that. So they told Jesus exactly what they wanted. And he responded.

I believe Jesus is still asking that question of us today. "*What do you want me to do for you?*" What's your real desire? Very often when there's an opportunity to have prayer for healing or whatever, we find other people – quite rightly and very commendably – praying for us. And it's not always what we want. They maybe praying for help in dealing with the problem rather for the problem to be eliminated. This morning we're going to have an opportunity to respond to Jesus' question and, if you want, someone will pray with you, rather than for you. I'll explain that a bit more later on. But don't be afraid to respond to Jesus with a specific request. After all, as we read plenty of times in the Bible, he knows what you really want anyway!

Then, the two men **had faith in Jesus as the Messiah**. They called out to him as the "*Son of David*". That was a clear indication that they recognised him in some way as the Messiah, the Christ who was sent by God to help restore creation – including humankind – to the state God intended before evil got in and messed things up. They believed that, as the Messiah, he could do something. I suspect they did not have a fully developed theology of Messiahship. I think it's fairly likely that they had a faith which was a long way from being perfect. It was almost certainly not as "sound" as many people today would like faith to be. But somewhere there was a germ of belief that Jesus could do something to help them. And Jesus responded to that little seed of faith.

The relationship between faith and healing is a complex one. I don't understand it and I don't suppose anyone else here this morning does, either. God seems to heal all kinds of people, however poorly- or

well-developed their faith. And there are lots of people, who seem to have immense faith and are very holy people, who don't get healed. It doesn't seem to make sense and it doesn't seem fair. But that shouldn't stop us asking for Jesus' help. It may even – whether the healing happens or not – help us move further along that path of discipleship onto which we have taken the first faltering steps. These two men, Matthew tells us, went off and followed Jesus. That would certainly have helped them in the development of their faith. They began a process which would allow them to see the world – not just literally but metaphorically, too – through different eyes. Praying out to Jesus may be the next step for you in your desire to follow Jesus.

Finally, these two men **seized the opportunity when it presented itself**. They had probably become accustomed to being ignored, patronised or abused by passers-by. So they were ready and waiting for an opportunity that might mean a dramatic change in their lives. As far as we know, Jesus never came back this way again. In couple of days he would be riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and by the end of the next week he was dead. Of course, they didn't know that at the time, but it was clearly vital that they took the chance when it came. A travelling preacher, whom they somehow recognised as the Messiah, asked them directly what they wanted and they told him. They didn't say they needed time to think about it, or that they needed to have a chat with the Rabbi to see if it was all kosher, or that they'd get back to him when they felt they were ready. They jumped at the chance when it came.

There's a chance this morning for you to respond to Jesus. He continues to ask, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Don't be discouraged – ask him. Jesus can do it and it could lead to your following him or deepening your relationship with him. Don't worry about the past or about things that you may think disqualify you from asking – there is nothing that can disqualify you. I spotted an advert on the television this week for some kind of computer game. I don't know exactly what the game was, but it involved all kinds of strange creatures and lots of explosions: the strapline was "*It doesn't matter who you were. It's what you will become.*" That's actually the bottom line of the Gospel of Jesus. He can transform you if you are prepared to respond to his question this morning: "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

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**Matthew 20:29-34**

As Jesus leaves Jericho with his disciples on the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem and the cross, he is hailed by a couple of blind men who are there in the crowd at the gate of the city. They hear the noise of the crowds and ask what's going on. We assume that they must have been told something about Jesus, or they've heard rumours about his ministry already, because they begin to call out to him using the Messianic title of "*Son of David*". And they call out with a desperate plea for help: "*Have mercy on us!*"

The crowd try to shut them up but that only encourages them to call out even more and eventually Jesus stops and addresses them with a direct question. Their ambitions are not limited by what would normally seem possible: they want their sight back. They want to be healed. And Jesus is moved by their appeal. He wants to give these men – and the crowd of frustrated bystanders – a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, a peep into what it's like to be able to live life to the full, as God wants. So he reaches out and touches their eyes. Of course, these two men are physically healed. Matthew tells us that "*they received their sight*". They could see what was a round them again. But there was also a sense in which they were able to look at life afresh (the Greek word for "*eyes*" here is an unusual one). Life would never be the same for them again, and they wanted to follow Jesus.

Firstly, these men **were not discouraged by the attitudes of others**. They knew what they wanted and they somehow believed that Jesus could deliver that. They kept on asking until Jesus responded. There was a persistence in their request that we can see Jesus commend elsewhere.

Secondly, these two men **were specific in their request**. Jesus' question to the two men is the very heart of this story: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" He gave them the opportunity to say exactly what the problem was and as they told Jesus exactly what they wanted he responded.

Then, the two men **had faith in Jesus as the Messiah**. They called out to him as the "*Son of David*". They did not have a fully developed theology of Messiahship. It's fairly likely that they had a faith which was a long way from being perfect. But somewhere there was a germ of belief that Jesus could do something to help them. And Jesus responded to that little seed of faith.

Finally, these two men **seized the opportunity when it presented itself**. They had probably become accustomed to being ignored, patronised or abused by passers-by. So they were ready and waiting for an opportunity that might mean a dramatic change in their lives. Jesus never came back this way again. By the end of the next week he was dead. Of course, they didn't know that at the time, but it was clearly vital that they took the chance when it came. A travelling preacher, whom they somehow recognised as the Messiah, asked them directly what they wanted and they told him. They jumped at the chance when it came.

*"It doesn't matter who you were. It's what you will become."* That's actually the bottom line of the Gospel of Jesus. He can transform you if you are prepared to respond to his question: "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

### **Questions for discussion**

1. "*The crowd rebuked*" the two blind men. Why do you think they did that? Are we any different today?
2. Why do you think Jesus asked the two men what they wanted? Wasn't it obvious?
3. It's unlikely that their faith in Jesus was what we might call "sound", so why did Jesus respond to them? What does that tell us about our attitude to people's faith?

4. If Jesus asked you the same question now ("*What do you want me to do for you?*"), how would you respond? (Be honest!)