

*Will the Real Disciple Please Stand Up?*

Isaiah 61.1-4; Mark 10.46-52

Dr. Brian Haymes

July 12, 2009

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So we might have some sympathy when, in Mark's Gospel in particular, the first disciples get a very bad press. Time and again they show that whatever Jesus is trying to teach them, they simply don't get it. For example, three times in Mark's Gospel Jesus gives a prediction of his passion saying, the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. It is a devastating thing to say, a disturbing agenda to live through. The first time Jesus says it, Peter tells him he must be wrong and that that is never going to happen to him! Jesus tells him he speaks like the very devil.

The second time Jesus says it we find the disciples having an argument among themselves about who is the greatest. The third time, as Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, we find James and John putting in a special bid for the best seats in glory which leads to another rumpus among the twelve. Goodness me, they have just been told about the critical passion of the Son of Man and they either haven't been listening or they have completely missed the point.

They are not the only ones. Take another story in Mark's gospel. A young wealthy powerful man comes to ask about eternal life. Jesus tells him to shed the load of possessions and wealth he is carrying and give it to the poor and then come and follow him. Perhaps in this case the man does understand what Jesus is saying and simply can't face such a way of life. He goes away with his head down and Jesus looks on him with sorrow.

It's enough to make us wonder whether anyone in Mark's Gospel gets it right? Does any one understand enough of Jesus and his message to make the appropriate response in such a way that we, the readers, years later, find admiring and worth emulating? Can any one give us the key? Glory be to God the answer is Yes. Let's hear it today for Bartimaeus. In the midst of all the disappointments we have a real disciple standing up. Let's spend some time in his company this morning.

Mark's Gospel has many stories of Jesus healing people, including some who are blind. Bartimaeus' healing is the last such story in the gospel and it occurs at a strategic place. It is pitched between these disturbing passion predictions and Jesus steadfastly going to Jerusalem and the cross

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The crowd however tell him to be quiet. You wonder why? Is he an embarrassment, a distraction, dangerous? Crowds can treat some folk as if they are not there, airbrushing them out of view. We all do it with people with whom we feel a certain awkwardness.

There is a programme on BBC Radio which is to help people with diabetes, and to be a support for those who share life with them. The series is entitled, Does he take sugar? Have you noticed how such questions can be asked as if the subject was not present and able to answer for themselves? So the crowd push Bartimaeus away. Do they fear that Jesus will be less interested in them if he heeds this desperate man?

Bartimaeus is persistent. He calls out all the more. Sometimes we have to persist when it comes to meeting with Jesus, not that he is unwilling to heed us but that so many other things can get in the way. The way Mark has already told his gospel story has meant that we have seen situations where family, peer groups, crowds, possessions, all these can hinder and frustrate a real meeting with Jesus because they can all draw their own deep commanding loyalty. Really meeting Jesus sometimes takes some serious initiative and commitment. It's not for the casual.

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Is this significant for us, we who belong to a generation eager to impress, not least with possessions and achievements? Bartimaeus knows and admits his need. He is making no attempt to make it on his own. He has next to nothing going for him so he comes as he is. His approach is not easy for our achievement, self-made, success orientated society to live with.

And Jesus asks him, what do you want me to do for you? He does not ask, what gifts do you have, in what way can you serve me? Rather, What do you want me to do for you? It is the same question Jesus asked of James and

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Bartimaeus responds, my teacher let me see again. And Jesus gave him back his sight. But this is more than one further story of Jesus the healer. Mark says Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way. Remember, he used to sit beside the way. But now he walks with Jesus, on the way even to Jerusalem. At last, we have a disciple, someone who is walking with Jesus on the way of the cross, in the purposes of God. Not for him arguments about getting the right seats, or taking power over others, or making something of himself. Not for him personal ambitions of rank or spirit. He follows Jesus, to do those things which belong to God's kingdom. He joins Jesus on the way, even the way of the cross.

What got him there? Here are two basic matters. First, remember that cry for mercy. It comes hard to us to realize that there are some things we cannot do for ourselves that only God in Christ can do for us. There is a humility in discipleship, a readiness to receive and be served. The twelve usually fail in Mark's gospel because they concentrate on themselves; they are the focus of their limited vision. They are not registered blind but they cannot really see. They are not aware of what Jesus can and must do for them, what God is already doing.

Lord help me, it is the first cry of serious discipleship. It may involve having our eyes opened to a wider vision of the world and our place in it. It might be needing to hear a word of forgiveness, setting us free from the past and its consequences. Lord, help me to deal with those things that are beyond me, that only you can accomplish in me and through me. It is the cry for help and mercy that leads to Jesus' crucial question, what do you want me to do for you? Are you really so proud that there is nothing you want and need Jesus to do for you?

But then this. Real discipleship is actually about following Jesus. It is not about simply supporting the church, or seeking some way of personal salvation or enriching your personal spiritual life, more than enjoying heady arguments about God. Discipleship is actively following Jesus. It's about loving your neighbour, even loving your enemy. It is about service, washing feet and giving

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Which means that our way of life will be different from others who walk another way through life, amassing possessions and seeking status. It means much more than having enjoyable arguments about God. In contrast, disciples seek those things which belong to God's kingdom, things which involve love and sacrifice, living for others, with characters formed not by the advertisers or our peers but by Jesus, his love and his values. It means being on the road, on the way with him. It means carrying the cross, suffering with and for others. That may disturb us but surely we get the point of this radical discipleship.

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They are not the only ones. Take another story in Mark's gospel. A young wealthy powerful man comes to ask about eternal life. Jesus tells him to shed the load of possessions and wealth he is carrying and give it to the poor and then come and follow him. Perhaps in this case the man does understand what Jesus is saying and simply can't face such a way of life. He goes away with his head down and Jesus looks on him with sorrow.

It's enough to make us wonder whether anyone in Mark's Gospel gets it right? Does any one understand enough of Jesus and his message to make the appropriate response in such a way that we, the readers, years later, find admiring and worth emulating? Can any one give us the key? Glory be to God the answer is Yes. Let's hear it today for Bartimaeus. In the midst of all the disappointments we have a real disciple standing up. Let's spend some time in his company this morning.

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