

October 24, 2021 - 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - Sermon notes

Job 42.1–6, 10–17 Psalm 34.1–8, (19–22), Hebrews 7.23–28, Mark 10.46–52

### “Does God Hear My Cries?”

The story of Job comes to its conclusion in this week's selection from that book of the Bible. The ending of the story is one in which Job's sufferings have ended and blessings abound. We learn that even though Job was a righteous man, suffering came into his life and he spent time wondering if God had forgotten him. Some companions came to comfort him but were not much comfort because they repeatedly concluded that Job's suffering was due to something he had done and yet at the end he is vindicated in his belief that he did nothing wrong. We know that bad things happen to good people and that no reasoning will ever be able to explain it and the story of Job does not try to explain it either. What the story of Job does help us understand is that when we go through suffering for which we can see no cause we quite naturally cry out to God and the testimony of Job, Bartimaeus, and others is that God hears and responds.

One of the elements of our faith life that brings me a great deal of comfort is reading scripture. Each week as we encounter portions of the love letter that is the Bible we are invited to partake of the comfort, wisdom, and challenge presented in order to help us become more able disciples of Jesus. For instance, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reflects on the fact that Jesus, our High Priest, holds his priesthood permanently which means, “he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb. 7:25) In the Apostles’ Creed we hear, “[Jesus] ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” The picture that is painted is of a permanently placed high priest at the right hand of God offering prayers on behalf of his people. Jesus, the friend of sinners, is speaking into his Father’s ear the intercessions on our behalf. That idea has helped me through some pretty difficult times. I’m not just shouting into the darkness when I pray but I am communicating with the One who died to rescue me and who continues to be involved in my growth and development. In the midst of my darkest hours the knowledge that God is listening to my cries through Jesus has made it more possible to take the next step and then the next step and then the next step.

We also have the stories of people like ‘Blind Bartimaeus’ to remind us of how Jesus replied to the requests made to him on earth. What these facts does for me is to encourage me to doubt the evidence of my eyes when it comes to the question, ‘has God heard my cries?’, and put into practice my faith in God and Jesus our Saviour. This act of faith can sometimes appear to be a denial of the facts but it is really a decision to believe the testimony of Jesus and his disciples. While Job was going through his difficulty he did not know from any external evidence that God was listening and responding but when that veil was removed and he could see in hindsight the hand of God he rejoiced. As we go through our struggles we have the stories of the people of God, from scripture and history, who have experienced over and over again the faithfulness of God and these stories can be helpful in encouraging us in our belief in the trustworthiness of God.

In the story of Bartimaeus we see some of these elements on display and so I invite you to take a closer look at the story. First, to set it within the context of the ongoing story of Jesus, the event takes place in Jericho. According to St. Mark the journey of Jesus and the disciples to Jericho began in Caesarea Philippi after Peter declared ‘you are the Messiah’ and Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. There were some stops along the way, in Capernaum for instance, and the party would have traveled alongside other pilgrims who were also on their way to Jerusalem. A well traveled road from Galilee followed the path of the Jordan River before turning south west to begin climbing the mountain to Jerusalem. Jericho was at the base of that climb and provided a rest-stop for many travelers. At the outskirts of most towns were smaller gathering places at which people would sit and ask for help and the same was true of Jericho. These were people who were too infirm to work or who, like Bartimaeus, were blind. As the party in which Jesus was traveling left Jericho this blind beggar somehow learned that Jesus was in the midst of the crowd and began to shout to get some attention. He cried out with a testimony of Jesus’ true identity, ‘Son of David’. This was one of the ways in which scripture identified the coming Messiah so Bartimaeus must have had some understanding of who Jesus was. We do not know all of the circumstances in his life but it stands to reason that Bartimaeus had probably prayed to God for healing more than once in his life. He, like Job, probably did not completely understand why he was given this ailment but we know from his comment to Jesus that he hadn’t been born blind. It is also likely that at times he had felt unheard by God and by the people around him. The people in our day who ask for help are often ignored or shunned and Bartimaeus must have experienced that kind of indifference. On this day something stirred him to make a fuss and even though people tried to silence him he continued to shout until Jesus called for him. Patience and persistence are sometimes needed when we are praying. I admire his ability to rise above the ridicule and indifference to go after what he believed he needed in that moment. He wasn’t about to let a few discouraging comments keep him from at least speaking with ‘the Son of David’ and seeing what God would do. The short encounter ends with Jesus asking him the question, “what do you want me to do for you?” to which he replies, “My teacher, let me see again”. His faith, combined with God’s mercy, resulted in him receiving the gift of restored vision and he committed his life to following Jesus from that time onward. In Bartimaeus’ case discipleship followed the healing and he is remembered, in part, because of his devotion to Jesus. Some scholars have noticed that the question Jesus asks Bartimaeus is exactly the same question he asked James and John when they came to beg a favour from him. We wouldn’t necessarily consider the request of James and John as a prayer but that is exactly what it was. It is interesting to compare the two encounters and see the differences in the way the prayers are answered.

In the case of James and John the request was denied because it was not in accordance with the will and purpose of God for their lives. In the case of Bartimaeus the request was granted immediately. In the case of Job the answer took a long time. This tells me that some of the things about which I am praying will get an answer, ‘no’ and some will get an answer ‘yes’. The difference will be whether the requests are according to the will and purpose of God for my life at that time. When Job asked for

healing the answer was in the will and purpose of God but the timing was, ‘not yet’. So, what I and many other believers have learned is that God always hears our prayers. Sometimes the answer is an immediate ‘yes’ and sometimes the answer is ‘no’ and sometimes the answer is ‘not yet’. The testimony of faithful people throughout the ages gives evidence that no matter what the answer seems to be God hears our prayers. We are told through these various witnesses that our God is faithful to us and does not leave us nor forsake us even when our senses come to a different conclusion. We are asked to believe and trust in this faithfulness.

One final note about the story of Bartimaeus. It may not be noticeable to all but St. Mark rarely uses names in his account of Jesus with the exception of naming some of Jesus’ disciples. The fact that Bartimaeus is named in this story probably means that he was well known to the disciples of Jesus in the years following the resurrection. We are told that ‘immediately he regained his sight and followed him [Jesus]’ (Mark 10:52b) On his way to the cross Jesus continued his work of healing and restoring and this blind man’s story is one which has been preserved in our scriptures. The result of his healing was a devotion to the cause of Christ and a commitment to the fellowship of the saints. May we share in that same blessing as we receive answers to our prayers.