

Sunday 28th October 2018

Readings: Hebrews 13. 18-21 and Mark 10. 46-52

When I was a child we spent a great deal of time travelling from Portsmouth to Wales by car. This was long before the days of in-car entertainment, although if we were lucky and there was a test match, dad would put the radio on. So my sister, Sue, and I would spend our time playing games.

I-Spy was a favourite, as were games like 'count the yellow cars' or spotting items alphabetically. We played games based on use of that precious sense, sight.

Eye sight is quite amazingly useful and without it life becomes difficult and restricted. We use it not just to recognise people but also to communicate, as apparently more than half of communication is non-verbal, based on body language and facial expression. We use sight to complete practical tasks, to read, draw or write. With our sight we enjoy beauty and we see danger coming.

These days there are many resources available to help the blind - guide dogs, Braille and, increasingly, technology. Many sight-impaired people work and live independently. However, in spite of medical advances, visual impairment is still, in most cases, incurable.

Imagine what it must have been like for Bartimaeus.

As a dependent and seemingly useless member of his family and society, his only career choice was begging. He would have been an embarrassment and source of guilt - for people in those days would

probably believe his blindness was inflicted as a result of something he or his family had done.

Then one day, Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is near.

- Jesus who has made the lame leap, the deaf hear, the dumb speak.
- Jesus who has raised the dead and cast out demons.
- Jesus who has restored sight to the blind.

So, Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus and Jesus calls him forward. Jesus does not presume anything. He knows Bartimaeus is blind and, for most people, what Bartimaeus wanted would have been obvious. Yet Jesus simply asks of him:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus asks to see and, once he is cured of his physical blindness, we are told he follows Jesus.

Some of you will know that I have difficulties with my eyesight and that, recently, these have become more troublesome. On Wednesday I talked about this at the midweek service, and I apologise to anyone hearing me repeat myself. But following my recent diagnosis of macular degeneration Alan and I thought it would be helpful if everyone knew what had happened and its implications – so that you are in a position to support me, when necessary.

It seems that I was born with the wrong-shaped eyes - most people's are shaped like a tennis ball but mine are like a rugby ball. One result is extreme short sightedness. This wasn't spotted until I started school at 5, when I could read fluently because I could get a book near enough to see, but couldn't catch a ball. So I lived my life wearing increasingly complex glasses.

About 4 years ago, a problem with my retina was picked up by my optician and I was referred to a specialist. Having diagnosed that my retina are basically disintegrating due to the abnormal shape of my eyes, he told me there was nothing to be done. This is a bit of a theme on my visits to eye doctors.

However, the consultant did suggest I pay to have the lenses replaced in my eyes. I did just that and it has since been said that those lenses are holding my eyes together, so I am very thankful that I did.

Since then it has been a bit of a saga and the recent diagnosis of dry macular degeneration just adds to my file at the hospital. There is no cure or treatment currently on offer.

I cannot pretend that I am happy about it or that is isn't highly inconvenient. I don't know how it will develop. It might just stay the same, but that is the best I can hope for. I will get more used to dealing with it, and increased use of technology will be part of my life.

My vision is poorest in the first 5 metres or so around me. Reading is especially difficult. I have a whole array of visual disturbances. My world contains few straight lines. I am awaiting an appointment with the DVLA to see if I can still drive.

At times, I am grieving for the loss of the ease of just seeing things. We can take things for granted until we lose them, can't we?

Everything has become a bit more tiring and complicated and some things are no longer worth the effort or are even impossible. I am subject to the occasional emotional wobble and even a bit of self-pity. When I told this to the Archdeacon, she said that was allowed, but I'm trying to keep it to a minimum.

When Alan reassured me that both churches would support me in every way possible, I told him that I had absolutely no doubt about that. I have only been with you a few months but I have complete faith in your ability and desire to look after me. There are practical things you can do to help, including giving time for written material to be prepared large print or transferred to the iPad. And please don't be offended that the iPad may be in regular use in services.

Most of all, however, I would ask you to pray for me, if you can.

- I am going to need patience and fortitude.
- I am going to need the right advice and support to be forthcoming.
- I am going to need to accept help and my increased dependence on others.
- I am going to have to accept new limitations.

None of that is going to be easy for me. So please do pray for me, if you feel able.

One other thing you can do, which would be helpful, is to ignore the issue much of the time! Generally there will be no news. I have no wish to be defined by my eye sight's imperfections. I am not ill and I am hugely blessed in my life. My glass remains half full.

The most immense blessings in my life are my family and my faith. My family are just awesome. And I have felt very, very held by God throughout the past month or so. I have absolutely no doubt I am in the right place and doing what God wants of me.

A colleague asked me if I felt God had sent me this affliction to test me in some way. The answer was a firm no. I never, ever believe that God inflicts suffering on us, instead he is united with us in our suffering. I could not love and worship a God who felt he needed to test me.

For Bartemaeus, there were two healings: the physical restoration of his eye sight and the spiritual healing that meant that from now on he could follow Jesus. Which was more precious to him, I wonder?

Jesus came to earth to heal us spiritually and bring us to God, not to provide us with perfect bodies - at least, not in this life. So, I did not ask you to pray for physical healing because I believe I am already whole. That is what letting God into my life means for me. I am as he intended me to be.

I hope that was helpful. If you have any questions I'll be happy to answer them. If there are any dramatic developments, then we will keep you informed. Otherwise, it's business as usual. Same curate. Same enthusiasm. Same love for God and his people. I just have rather poorer eye sight than when we first met.