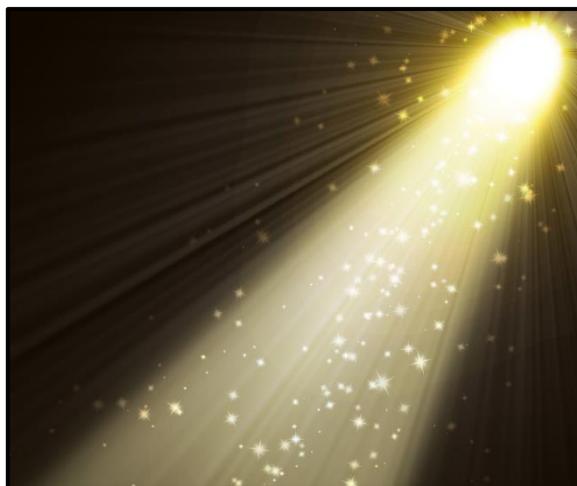


## Reflection on Sunday 25 September 2022

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Psalm 112 and Mark 10. 46-52)



### Theatre of Hope

When I was child, I had a toy theatre. It was a Prufrock Toy Theatre, some of you may know what I'm talking about. It was made from cardboard, slotted together, with a proscenium arch and scenery and figures on wires that the operator, standing behind the theatre, slid backwards and forwards from the side, across the stage. My theatre came with a script for *Treasure Island*, full of exciting characters like Long John Silver and the heroic Jim Lad.

After a couple of years and many hours of enjoyment playing with this theatre, it started to fall apart and eventually collapsed completely. No amount of Sellotape could repair it and I was mortified, plunged into a kind of darkness of child, toy-related bereavement.

I must have been about nine at the time and I had been going to church with my parents for a while. I had a growing curiosity about religion and, I suppose, was at the start of that long journey of belief. I

accepted that there was a God and I knew that in church we prayed to God and asked Him for the things we felt we needed in life.

And so, I started praying privately to God, one of the first prayers I remember. Although I recall that it was during the summer and there were no 'present days' coming up (no birthday or Christmas), I asked God if he could give me a new toy theatre.

Well, it didn't happen. God seemed to ignore my request. Time went by, months in fact, and my prayer for a new theatre began to fade. And then Christmas came and, on Christmas morning, I crept downstairs very early to look at my presents, and there, on the dining room table, was a large box covered in a blanket. A little card said it was for me and so I whipped off the blanket and found that it wasn't a box at all. It was a model theatre - not a 'toy' theatre - but a scale model of the Nottingham Playhouse stage (we lived in Nottingham at the time), made from wood, with a proscenium arch and side entrances; a turntable that went round, slots for the scenery and lighting gantries above the stage. It was amazing.

My father, who was an architect, had designed it and asked a carpenter friend to make it. Dad had finished it off by painting it black, just like the Nottingham Playhouse. It was much more than I had hoped for and I spent the next couple of years absorbed in this theatre; playing with it was my favourite hobby, creating worlds in miniature, writing and performing plays that, if I had more time, I would tell you about but, the reason I'm telling you about the theatre is because God did answer my prayer abundantly... eventually.

He took his time but, through my dad, he gave me something that was bigger and better than I had asked for.

When I read Psalm 112, I hear the Psalmist saying that if we fear the Lord - in other words, believe in God - wealth and riches will be in our house, there will always be light in the darkness, we will never be shaken, we need never be afraid.

It's a lovely idea and some of the time it is true - we don't get a cardboard toy theatre, we get a proper model theatre. But for most of us, if you're like me, we go through ups and downs in life and God doesn't always answer our prayers by giving us what we think we need or when we think we need it.

A few years ago, when I was going through a difficult phase with some serious health issues (some of you were on that journey with me), one of the chaplains at the Lister Hospital where I was an in-patient for three months, said to me: *'If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans'*.

When blind Bartimaeus sat by the side of the road in his own darkness, life was passing him by. But he called out to Jesus and, when Jesus said: *'What do you want me to do for you?'*, the blind man said: *'Let me see again'*. Immediately he regained his sight and followed Christ.

This is very revealing. For a start, when he says let me see again, it suggests that he once had his sight but had lost it and had entered a period of darkness. And then, when Jesus restored his vision, he ended up following Christ. It's a great analogy. A little bit corny, perhaps, but still worth enjoying.

How many times have we been in our own dark place and have spoken to God about it and our vision or faith has been restored, often by a chink of light that we weren't expecting?

I suspect that many of us have been in our own dark place in recent weeks. The death of the Queen and the funeral in Westminster Abbey which, as Justin Welby suggested in his address and Alan did in his own sermon last week, may have made the bereavement of the Royal Family remind us of our own times of grief and personal loss.

I had a sad moment last weekend, my own dark place. My father died earlier this year and last Saturday, I had to take all his architectural drawings, 70 years' worth, a lifetime of work, to the municipal recycling site in Ware. Except I was told that the plans weren't recyclable and had to be thrown away.

It was heart-breaking but, luckily, I had looked through them in advance and, in among the plans for office buildings and private houses and churches and church renovations, there were the plans for my model theatre. He had kept them, attaching the same importance to that small project as he did to all his big buildings. I thought about his dedication and the happiness that the theatre had provided in my childhood. It was a shaft of light that I wasn't expecting in that moment of darkness.

Sometimes we feel that God isn't listening to us; sometimes we feel abandoned. Sometimes we might feel like Bartimaeus, sitting in our own darkness as life passes us by. The thing about sitting in our darkness and begging is that we can never see what is coming to us. I don't think blind Bartimaeus could see what or who was coming his way the day he sat by the roadside. The most he could do was to be faithful to his darkness, to not run away, but to cry out in hope. Along comes Jesus and, not only does he restore his sight, but makes him see again in a different way.

American Franciscan priest Richard Rohr describes this as 'order, disorder; reorder'. I suspect that this process has happened to all of us in our lives. I hope it has. And, if you're still feeling a bit shaken by the recent end of an era, and are fearful about the future, then I urge you to re-read Psalm 112 and the story of Bartimaeus, and I hope and pray that you will see and appreciate, in time, the plans for a model theatre, or something similar.

Amen