

MARK 10:46-52  
IN THE HAND OR IN THE HEART?

“Hostile to Church, friendly to Jesus Christ.’ These words describe large numbers of people, especially young people, today. What they have rejected is the contemporary church, not Jesus Himself... the person and teaching of Jesus have not lost their appeal... His ideals appear to have been incorruptible. He breathed love and peace wherever he went... He invariably practised what He preached... if and when people read about Jesus, they find that he holds for them a fascination they cannot easily escape.” These words were written in 1958 by John Stott, one of the most famous Christian writers and preachers of the twentieth century. They come from the opening to one of the most widely read Christian books of all time *Basic Christianity*; these words are over 60 years old, but are perhaps more true now than ever they were. People write off the institution of the Church for a whole variety of reasons, but Jesus Himself they find fascinating and attractive. He still speaks to their hearts.

Today is Bible Sunday, sponsored by the Bible Societies, as a way of reminding us of the value and importance of the Bible in Christian faith, Christian life and in the life of the Church. I was speaking earlier of the Bible as a signpost, pointing people to Jesus, helping us to see what Jesus is like so that we can believe in Him. It is still one of the best-selling books across the world; I suspect that no-one really knows just how many Bibles are sold each year. There was a great celebration in 2012 of 100 million bibles printed in communist China by the Amity Press and of the Church in China that is hungry to receive them, Christians who know that the Bible is the key to growing their faith and equipping them to live Christian lives. The Bible is not an end in itself, but leads us to know and love Jesus better; that is its whole aim and reason for being. I meet lots of people who wish they had a stronger faith, or see other people’s faith and wish they shared it; but we have to create conditions by which faith can grow, the atmosphere in which faith can be created and grow, and one of the pieces in creating that atmosphere is reading the Bible.

We read this little story of Bartimaeus. Imagine yourself in the crowd as Jesus is leaving Jericho. It is hot; the road is dusty; we are beginning the climb up out of Jericho to go to Jerusalem. We have seen Jesus meet Zaccheus, perhaps, and there is a buzz of conversation about the change in the tax-collector because he met Jesus; we’ve seen other things too. No-one has really noticed the blind man begging beside the road; we’ve seen him, but it is a common sight so we’ve not really paid him much attention. Then he starts calling out; he’s heard the buzz of conversation and has asked someone in the crowd “Who is it? Who’s going past? What’s the buzz all about?” Jesus of Nazareth is the answer and Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus; he has heard that Jesus can heal people; others have told him. So he decides to call out. The first thing we really hear is this voice coming from the side of the road: “*Jesus, Son...*” (*Mark 10:47*)

Our first reaction? ‘Not another one!’ We’ve seen lots of people sitting at the side of the road asking for help. ‘He’s interrupting our conversation! We’re in a hurry to get to Jerusalem before dark; this Jericho to Jerusalem road is dangerous, with bandits and robbers; it’s not a place to be stuck at night in the dark, even if there is a crowd. Let’s just tell him to be quiet and leave us alone; Jesus is too busy to deal with another roadside beggar.’ “*Many rebuked...*” (*10:48*) But he’s not for giving up so easily; he’s a persistent man; “*He shouted...*” (*10:48b*) He really wanted to meet Jesus and wasn’t going to be put off by other people getting in the way or telling him he didn’t belong. So

he shouted all the louder and Jesus heard him. What is Jesus going to do? We think we might know, but with Jesus you're just never too sure about what He will say and do. He's calling the blind beggar and the man is coming over; some of us are helping him.

*"What do..." (10:51)* It seems an obvious question, but Jesus is the master at getting people to talk to Him and tell Him about their situation and then express their faith. None of us is surprised when the beggar says *"Rabbi..." (10:51)* That simple phrase states something fairly obvious, but it gives the man the chance to put into words what it is that he needs and how he thinks Jesus can help him. In a sense, he is professing his faith, showing Jesus that he knows Jesus can heal him. What we all expect, happens: *"Go, your..." (10:52)* He man joins our crowd; will he come with us all the way? Or just for a little while? Another man's life is changed by meeting Jesus!

Now try to imagine yourself as Bartimaeus in the story. You are sitting by the side of the road; this day has begun like every other day; your friends have brought you to the place you always sit by the side of the road leaving Jericho; people are going to Jerusalem and perhaps some of them, traders, pilgrims, travellers, might put some money in your bowl. You hear the commotion; it is unusual; a crowd is coming and you ask the question of someone who passes fairly nearby; you hear their footsteps; "who is it?" You've heard of Jesus before and call out to him, but the people nearest tell you to be quiet; don't disturb Him, don't bother Him; He's too busy. You are determined to be heard; you call out again! This time Jesus Himself hears you and calls you over; you'll answer any question, even most the obvious and what a reward! Wow! I can see!

Why did Mark write this story down? He wanted to show people what Jesus is like and what Jesus can do! Other stories do the same. They build up a picture of Jesus. Jesus is able to heal; Jesus is able to open eyes that are blind; Jesus is able to transform people's lives; faith in Jesus is not in vain, but the blessing of God will be given to the person who believes. All of these are part of Mark's reason for telling us this story, to point us to Jesus so that our faith in Him can be stronger, so that we have a deeper appreciation of what Jesus can do. Jesus is the centre of this whole gospel; He is the One about whom it is written; it is His story. Some of us, our eyes are not what they were; we struggle to read or see into the distance, but when I put my glasses on I can see when you fall asleep! Someone has suggested that reading the bible is like putting on a pair of glasses, "gathering together the impressions of God, (it) dissipates the darkness and shows us the true God clearly." (John Calvin Inst 1.64) That's why Mark wrote this story - to show us Jesus so that we might believe in Him.

What Mark does in this story, Hebrews does in different way, with big statements of faith. *"Therefore He..." (Heb 7:25)* These three little words are the key to so much of Christian faith: "He is able..." – faith is persuaded that Jesus is able to do something for us; Bartimaeus is persuaded that Jesus could make him see; us – we are persuaded that Jesus is able to reconcile us with God and take away our sin. Hebrews is written to a group of Christians from a Jewish background who were finding life and faith a bit of a struggle, and were in danger of drifting away from the faith altogether because it was too hard. Hebrews is written to remind them of the great salvation that Jesus has achieved; and how valuable faith is. Through their experience we can see something of the greatness of our salvation and that Jesus is able to save us completely and totally. Here are two different ways of doing the same thing in the Bible – showing us Jesus as someone in whom to believe and trust.

Jesus is someone to trust. Our reasons for calling out to Him may be same, may be different, but call out to Him we do and many others do too! We have this engaging picture of someone who listens to our cries for help and is full of love and compassion for people in need. Is this the fascination that Jesus holds for many people? We admire His ability to heal and help, His compassion, His love and His power? Have the ideals, values and standards that He teaches a timeless quality to them that people admire and long to share but are not sure how to go about it? Without the Bible we don't have access to this Jesus; how can we engage with this fascinating person, with the One we call Saviour and Lord without reading, listening to, and engaging with the Bible? Otherwise our sight of Jesus is blurred, confused – we need to use the glasses God has given us! The Bible is not an end in itself, but points us to Jesus; it allows us to encounter Him. People read the pages of this book and it is not the book that impresses them most; what impresses them most is the Man that emerges from the book, this real-life encounter with the living God.

But this story shows us something else; it shows us ourselves. It holds a mirror up to our hearts and to our behaviour. What happened when Bartimaeus called to Jesus first? People tried to shut him up; they tried to stop him. Who are these people? These are the followers of Jesus, the crowd of disciples around Him. This is other reason for that John Stott quote at the start of the sermon: has the church got in the way of people encountering Jesus? Have we put up barriers to people that, in effect, have said “go away!”? The answer to that is undoubtedly “yes”. The Church's institutions, our traditions (easy targets, mind you), our own personal attitudes, even a single thoughtless remark – all of these and so many other things have become barriers to some and have turned them away from Jesus. Some are not as persistent as Bartimaeus and have just turned their back and gone away, put off by our barriers. Only when they heard Jesus say “call him” did their attitude change and they cleared the path for Bartimaeus to get to Jesus; till then, the disciples were a barrier. The Bible shows us ourselves, it challenges us about the way we think, speak and behave; it holds a mirror to our hearts and minds; that can be painful, but it is for our good. The challenge for us as church and as Christians is to clear the path for people to come to Jesus, to point people to Him so that others may find grace for their lives too.

“The Word in the hand is fine. The Word in the head is better, but the Word in the heart transforms us and matures us in Christ.” I found this in some material prepared by the Scottish Bible Society for Bible Sunday. I would imagine that almost all of us have a Bible in the house (the hand); some of us will be familiar with it and know something of it (the head); but the challenge for all of us is to get the Bible into our hearts so that its words shape us, shape the way we think, the way we believe, the way we behave. “I wish I had your faith” people say – it is really simple and you can; read the Bible and take it seriously and your faith will grow and stretch and deepen. You don't know where to start – well, start with Mark's gospel and put yourself in these stories and see how they feel; react to them, try to understand them; what does this story teach about Jesus? Take some of the Bible notes from the vestibule; use them to help deepen your understanding of the Bible and that will deepen your faith. The Bible in the hand? In our head? Or in our hearts? Live by faith in Jesus – He is able to save! Tell others!