

## **Last after Trinity 2015**

It was this story of blind Bartimaeus that I used once for an assembly at Cross Farm School. With small children it is usually possible to tell if you have held their attention - they don't have the social graces of adults. It seemed to be going well. With the aid of props and helpers, I had focussed on Bartimaeus' cloak, and how it would have been vitally important to him to keep him warm at night and sheltered from the sun by day. But so keen had he been to come to Jesus that he had thrown it aside with no guarantee that he would get it back. How would he ever find it again being blind? That was faith for you!

At the end a small girl put up her hand to ask a question.

Good. Questions are always a good sign.

She had huge serious eyes and spoke so quietly that I had to lean forward to hear her.

"I've got new shoes" she said.

And indeed she did.

I wasn't quite sure what to say. The whole assembly had been completely meaningless to her. It was just another story, like James and the Giant Peach or Hansel and Gretel. A story of people with strange names, in lands that she had never visited, where odd things happened.

And that is probably how the bible appears to most people.

Today is Bible Sunday. It is a good day for thinking about this most important collection of writings. How do we get away from the idea that it consists of a series of unconnected stories, many of which are fairly unedifying? If you come regularly to evensong, you will be well aware that sometimes for weeks on end we have readings from the Old Testament which are tales of terrible battles, or the political manoeuvrings of the leaders of nations, or, worse still, of God's frightful punishments when people have not obeyed him. What people make of these if they are the only parts of the Bible they hear I dread to think. But even those of us who come regularly are presented with the Bible as just this, as a series of disconnected stories.

However, the usual alternative way of treating the bible is not much better. That is to view it as a rule book. If you obey the rules you get the reward of eternal life, and if you don't you get the punishment of eternal damnation. But those who treat the bible in this way have to find a way with dealing with its inconsistencies and contradictions. So people become very selective about which passages are important and which to dismiss.

But the bible is neither a series of unrelated stories nor a rule book. Instead it is a puzzling account of a people's relationship with God and each other. A book of clues rather than rules.

So why bother to try to tell these stories to our children?

Or take today's gospel story; why is it in the least relevant to us?

It is another healing. So what? Is the point that Jesus is powerful? That he can heal? The miracles have led people into difficult territory, either they have been so embarrassed by something apparently supernatural going on that they have sought to find ways of explaining them away, or at the other extreme the miraculous power has been given huge importance. Faith can cure you, throw away your pills. But, in this story, I am not sure that the *healing* is as important as *who* it is that is healed.

A beggar. Someone no-one ever noticed, let alone cared about. This beggar was allowed to butt into proceedings, was listened to, cared for, renewed, given what he needed to participate fully in the society around him. he was given not just his sight, but a way out of his miserable daily life. He would not have to beg any more. He could get work, perhaps marry, have dignity.

Yes this story tells us that Jesus was a healer, that he wrought miracles, but far more importantly it tells us that he cared about people. Not just the rich or the powerful, but the ones that everyone despised. He could help them to live their lives to the full.

What implications this has. It means that you and I are valued, loved for who we are. We don't have to be clever, or attractive, or amusing or physically fit or even good. We are valued for who we are.

When as a Christian community we pray for those who are ill, we hope for a miracle. But sadly, we do not always get a miracle. This week we have lost two wonderful members of our congregation, people of great faith and commitment. It is easy for us to be angry at God (and I'll be honest, sometimes I am) but what this reading assures us is that God cares. God loves us. We are special. But no one of us is any more special than anyone else.

However good we are, however kind or generous or loving, or indeed full of faith, it will not immunise us against the bad luck of being caught in an earthquake or getting cancer or being treated abominably by someone we trust. This is not because God wills it, but because that is the way the world is, the risk is an integral part of the creative possibilities of life.

The bible teaches us so many things, but today there are just two messages that I want to emphasise.

First, God loves no-one more than he loves you, and that's true whatever you have done, however much other people despise you. God values you. That is why the gospel is such good news for the poor and disadvantaged.

But, second, God loves no-one less than he loves you, however much other people think you are fabulous. That is why the gospel is such a challenge for the rich, powerful, successful or indeed the religious.

This is hard. We can aspire to be holy but it won't make God love us any more. We have no more right to a miracle than anyone else. We are being asked to love God for his sake not ours, to love other people for their sake and for God's sake, not ours. This isn't how our society usually works.

The Bible is a love story. It has exciting bits, scary bits, wonderful poetry (some of it quite erotic). It is a book we have to read because it is ultimately our story, for it is the story of how God love us.

Amen.