

## 6. A question for Bartimaeus

# WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

Luke 18v41

Over the past few months I've been bringing a series of Biblical messages under the title: 'Answering God's questions'. Up to this point every one has been from the Old Testament. But today I want to stray into the New and look at a question Jesus asked. I can do this because we believe that Jesus was, and is, God. The question is: **What do you want me to do for you?**

The text is Luke 18v35-43. **v35: As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.** The incident takes place at Jericho, which had become an important place again. Herod the Great had rebuilt the walls; it had a theatre, amphitheatre, palace and magnificent gardens. The Jewish historian Josephus called Jericho a "little Paradise." The story begins with a blind man begging by the side of the road outside Jericho. We are dependent on Mark's Gospel for his name, *Bartimaeus*. It is rare for someone Jesus healed to be named, so it is likely that he became a disciple and belonged to the early church. Mark may even have known him.

**v36,37: When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."** Kenneth Bailey helps us understand what is happening here. *"In the Middle East, village people show honor to an important guest by walking some distance out of town to greet the guest and escort him or her into the village. At times, the popularity of the guest can be measured by how far the crowd walks to welcome the visitor. In the early 1960's our family resided in Assuit in the south of Egypt. At that time, the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser was at the height of his power and popularity. While we were there, Nasser visited Assuit. As his entourage approached the city, thousands walked more than ten miles out of town to greet him. The enthusiastic patriots then obliged all the cars in the presidential party to turn off their motors while the crowd tied ropes to the bumpers of the vehicles and pulled them the last ten miles in Assuit as a gesture of honour to the great man....Some of the crowd with Jesus may have followed him from Galilee, but the majority greeting him were most likely from Jericho."* (1)

Back to Bartimaeus: **vv38, 39: He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who led the way** i.e. the reception committee – the "big-wigs"! **rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"** There are two things to notice about the blind man's cries.

First they were desperate. The word used in verse 39 is different from that used in v38. The first shout is an ordinary loud shout to attract attention. The second is *"an almost animal cry."* (2) There was nothing dignified about the way he acted - dignity was a luxury he didn't have time for. Others were embarrassed but he wasn't! This was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and nobody was going to silence him.

Second his cries were distinctive. He had been told that *Jesus of Nazareth* was passing by; but he called out "*Jesus, Son of David*". This was no ordinary title; it was reserved for the Messiah. He must have heard different opinions about Jesus. He was blind but there was nothing wrong with his ears! So he nailed his colours to the mast. "*Jesus, Son of David!*" Is this why some in the crowd tried to shut him up? So Bartimaeus, you're a theologian now are you?

**vv40: Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him.** Jesus didn't just over-ride the censure - he actually ordered those who were insulting the blind man to escort him to a personal audience. Jesus gave his full attention to a poor man while the important people looked on.

**v40, 41: When he came near, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"** It might seem obvious to us what the man would ask. But maybe it was not so obvious. A blind man could earn a living. Giving alms to such a man was an important part of the culture. Bailey again:

*"In traditional Middle Eastern society beggars are a recognized part of the community and are understood to be offering "services" to it. Every pious person is expected to give to the poor. But if the poor are not readily available to receive alms, how can this particular duty be fulfilled? The traditional beggar does not say, "Excuse me, Mister, do you have a few coins for a crust of bread?" Instead, he sits in a public place and challenges passers by with "Give to God!" He is really saying, "My needs are beside the point. I am offering you a golden opportunity to fulfil one of your obligations to God." When a beggar receives money (whatever the amount) he usually stands up and in a loud voice proclaims the giver to be the most noble person he has ever met and invokes God's grace and blessing on the giver, his family, his friends and associates, his going out and coming in, and many other good things. Such public praise is surely worth the small sum given to the beggar."*

But what would the blind man do if he could see and no longer beg? He had no other skills or training. The question was not such an obvious one. Jesus wanted him to think about it first. "**What do you want me to do for you?**" The question is worth us thinking about too. If you were sitting by the roadside what would your cry be about? If Jesus were to ask you this same question what would you reply? Your answer could reveal a lot about you.

- It could show how needy you are feeling

This must have been true of the blind man. He was desperate. His blindness had forced him to adopt this lifestyle of a beggar. And I haven't mentioned the meaning of his name yet! *Bartimaeus* can be translated "*Son of filth*". Perhaps this is why Luke omits to mention it. This poor man was at the bottom of the social scale; he was on the same level as dog dirt. He must have come to think of himself like that. "*I'm rubbish, worthless, a piece of filth.*" Despite the almsgiving, that's how polite society would have regarded him. Unclean! Then along comes Jesus and says **What do you want me to do for you? "Lord, I want to see."** This is his great need. Seeing will change everything. What about you? Do you have some great need? This question will uncover it.

- It could reveal how selfish or unselfish you are

Offer these words on the high street and you can be certain that fame, success, romance, money, perfect health and a long life will be on people's wish list. Like the story of the family man living in semi-detached suburbia who hears God's voice saying *"Ask anything and I'll grant it to you!"* After recovering from the shock the man said, *"All right then. I'd like a three lane motorway from my door to the south of France that gets me there in ten minutes."* There was a pause before God answered, *"Don't you think that's a bit selfish?"* *"Yes, I suppose you're right"*, the man acknowledged. *"So here's another instead. My wife is a mystery to me. In fact all women are a mystery to me. My request is: I want to understand women."* And God replied: *"How many lanes did you say you wanted?"*

Of course some people can *never* be persuaded to think of their own needs – their default position is to think of others. I think most mothers are like this. That is why the case of Anne Darwin, who with her husband has just been sentenced to six years in prison, is such an unusual one. Not many mothers would deceive two sons in the way she did, putting them through the agony of bereavement – for money. With most mothers their first thought is for their children – whether they are still young and at home or have flown the nest. You mothers would be putting in requests for your kids over yourself.

- It could uncover the major passion of your life

Some people burn with red hot passion over injustice. Their thoughts go immediately to people who are trapped by poverty or debt or addiction. The very idea of asking for something selfish or trivial is ludicrous. Lord Shaftsbury, a Christian at the forefront of social reform in the nineteenth century said: *"I would rather be Head of the Ragged Schools than have command of armies."* But this had not always been the case. *"Time was when I could not sleep for ambition. I thought of nothing but fame and immortality. I could not bear the idea of dying and being forgotten."* God had put this new passion in him. And by giving his life away he became famous!

Others burn with red hot passion about people going to a lost eternity. We know exactly what they will ask. John ("Praying") Hyde, was a missionary in India. He prayed, *"O God, give me souls or I die!"* C.T. Studd had everything in his generation: success, fame, family connections wealth and outstanding prospects. Then his life was transformed by Jesus Christ and he wrote:

*"Some want to live within the sound of Church or Chapel bell;  
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."*

- It could demonstrate that you are leadership material

In the Bible God tests the hearts of leaders in this way to see if they have a servant heart or whether they are seeking power or profile. This is what is going on in 1 Kings 3. When King David died, his son Solomon became king. God appeared to him in a dream, and said **"Ask for whatever you want me to give you"** (v5) Solomon answered *"give your servant a discerning heart to*

*govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours.” The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for - both riches and honour.” (v9-14) **What do you want me to do for you?***

- It could ignite your faith

Perhaps you think this has all been hypothetical; that I’ve been playing a game. After all, this isn’t Jericho and Jesus isn’t passing by asking: **What do you want me to do for you?** But the truth is - this same question is embedded in the invitations *to ask* we find on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels. Matthew 7v8: *“Ask and it will be given to you.”* John 14v13: *“I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.* John 16v24: *“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”* Some people find that their faith is ignited by promises like these. Intercessors thrive on them.

That’s what happened with the blind man when Jesus said **“What do you want me to do for you? “Lord, I want to see.” Jesus said, “Receive your sight, your faith has healed you.”** How did this man express faith?

- He believed that Jesus would hear the cries of a poor and needy man
- He was not ashamed to acknowledge & glorify Jesus publicly
- He believed that Jesus had the power to heal him.
- He was very specific in his request. Faith is not vague.

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**What do you want me to do for you? “Lord, I want to see,” he replied.** In the Gospels there is a very clear link between physical and spiritual blindness. Jesus Himself made the link (John 8v12; 9v39-41) We sing: *“Open my eyes Lord, I want to see Jesus.”* What a request! This is still one of the best ways to respond to Jesus’ question; because having your eyes opened to Jesus changes everything. I suspect it did for this man. **Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God.**

**John Wilthew. July 2008.**

(1) Kenneth R. Bailey: ‘Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels’ IVP Academic. 2008.

(2) William Barclay: ‘The Gospel of Luke’ (Daily Study Bible) The Saint Andrew Press. 1975