

Mark 10: 46-52

Pymble 28.10.18

Seeing and following

Today I'd like to think about the *Shushers* in this story:
those in the crowd who told Bartimaeus to be quiet
when he shouted out to Jesus.

Let's think about them
and what they might represent as we engage this familiar story.

Jesus and the crowd are getting much closer to Jerusalem –
that's what the mention of Jericho implies –
it is about 25kms from Jerusalem
whereas Capernaum, where they set out from,
is about 130kms away.

The point is: tension is mounting in the narrative
because we are getting closer to the place
where Jesus has said he will be betrayed and killed.

Bartimaeus discovers the commotion he is hearing
is caused by Jesus of Nazareth as he heads out of the town.
Bartimaeus must have already heard about Jesus.
His reputation as one who has the power to heal,
and perhaps also as one who engages with people
from all rungs of society, has gone ahead of him,
which is not surprising.
Good news travels fast, then, as it does now.

It is the mention of Jesus' name
that emboldens Bartimaeus to shout out to him.
"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."
This term, *Son of David*, reflects some understanding;
some faith on Bartimaeus' part.
It is a royal title for Jesus that implies messiahship.
And it would have been politically dangerous
to be yelling that sort of thing across the crowd.
But Bartimaeus doesn't seem too concerned.
He only wants to meet Jesus.

It is his enthusiastic crying out
that prompts some in the crowd to sternly tell him to be quiet.
These I am dubbing, the *Shushers*.
I wonder what motivates them?
Is it that they think Bartimaeus is unworthy of Jesus?
After all, he is doubly disqualified; being blind *and* a beggar.
Is it that they somehow think they control what is going on?
That *they* determine who will and won't get access to Jesus?

We don't exactly know –
there might be a bit of each of these motives in their actions.

Actually, we have seen this sort of behaviour before in Mark's gospel.
Earlier in this same chapter,
the disciples were harshly discouraging parents
from bringing their children to Jesus for him to bless them.
Again, like the Shushers,
we sense something of their own importance;
their own imagined power as those close to Jesus.
Perhaps they felt they were doing Jesus a favour,
but in the end, all they were doing
was blocking a much-needed personal encounter with Jesus.

Blockers and Shushers.

They're close to Jesus; maybe even disciples;
they think they understand Jesus
but ultimately act to prevent others from getting to him.
And I guess we have to ask ourselves
if the church ever plays that role?
Are there ways that we, perhaps with the best of intentions,
silence the cries of those who would seek Jesus?
Are there times when we might stand as silent judge
about who is and isn't worthy of Jesus;
and block their chance of getting to him?

We can do this in our planning and advertising – imagining only
a certain type of person responding to our invitations.
We can do this in our welcome - or otherwise -
to whoever comes into our doors or to our programs.
Does our response indicate
a generous welcome or a reluctant obligation?
People will know immediately whether our welcome is genuine or not.

Perhaps those original Shushers have been with Jesus for a while now.
Perhaps they think they "own" Jesus a little bit –
that they understand him and the type of person
who will respond to the message.
Perhaps they imagine they know *when* Jesus responds to individuals,
and that when he's leaving a town, is not one of those times.
Shut up Bartimaeus. Now is not the time.
You are not the right type of person. Shush!

It would be interesting to know whether Jesus heard the Shushers.
If he did, then it may indicate that his calling Bartimaeus
was deliberately in response to their shushing;

to their attempt to control who came to him.
But I think the point remains valid even if Jesus didn't hear them:
Jesus won't have others deciding who is worthy of him.
Jesus won't have people – no matter how close they are to him –
block and silence people who need access to the grace of God.

In Aussie Rules football,
players are allowed to shepherd an opposition player,
which means they can use their hip and shoulder
to prevent the other player from getting to the ball.
In most football codes, you have to have possession of the ball
before an opponent can touch or tackle you,
but in AFL you can hip and shoulder
when the other player is within 5 metres of the ball.
It is all about denying access to the ball, even before they get to it.

Sometimes I think about how the Church
denies access to God for so many people...
how we hip and shoulder often the most vulnerable
away from the grace of Christ.
We do so when we break the trust of so many
through the tragedy of sexual abuse;
we do so in teachings and actions
that treat women as less than equal to men;
we do so in pious decisions about who Churches
will and won't allow on their property;
and in declarations about allowing some people to marry or not –
and I'm not even referring to gay marriage here,
but to a denomination's decision this week
that they will finally allow a bishop to consider
approving the remarriage of a divorced person,
who's been abused by their former spouse.
How gracious.
That battle has only been going on for 34 years.

Hip, shoulder, shepherding, blocking, shushing;
it all comes down to those close to Jesus –
who are already recipients of his grace –
wanting to deny or restrict that access to others.

Back at Jericho's gate, the Shusher's shushing is pointless.
Bartimaeus won't be deterred; he only cries out louder
and his enthusiasm and single-mindedness
is rewarded by Jesus as he stops and says to call him over.
Notice that the ones who did the shushing,

now have to convey Jesus' welcome.

They say, "*Take heart, get up, he is calling you.*"

And being such close eyewitnesses to the healing, they have to confront afresh the free and open grace of Christ that only minutes ago they were wanting to restrict and deny.

Of course, in this story, Bartimaeus regaining his sight points to the possibility of those around Jesus seeing anew.

Will the Shushers release their control

on who should be allowed access to Jesus

and realise that he welcomes all?

Will the blockers get out of the way

and indeed make it easier for others to find Jesus?

Will the Church confront the way

many of its statements actually push people away from Christ?

Will we look again at ways

we can be more welcoming as a congregation?

If so, then the grace and wonder

of Christ's miracle with Bartimaeus

will not remain in the first century

but will flow like precious water in a parched land

to our own time and place.