

The Pattern of Service

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

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The gospel accounts are full of encounters between people with need and Jesus. The story this morning relates the meeting between Jesus and the blind man - Bartimaeus. The restoration of sight, was the one miracle that sets Jesus apart from the other prophets. In the story that is recorded in John, the man who was born blind and could now see challenges the authorities with this idea. "*Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind*", he says. Bartimaeus is another story for he was not blind from birth because he wished to see again.

This unique miracle of Jesus may have been repeated many times although the Gospel accounts record only three or four. John talks of how the writings are a sample of Jesus life and not the whole story.

So we immediately face a question when we engage the gospel stories - Why this particular passage? We must make the assumption that the material that we have was edited (or selected) by the writer to reinforce the account that he is giving. There is a technical term for this in Biblical Studies - *Redaction Criticism*, but simply put, it is to find an answer to the question - Why this passage here and now? It is in answering this question that we might begin to gain an insight into the purpose of the story. In doing this, we can begin to understand the message that it is meant to convey. One of the difficulties that we have in the way we engage Scripture in church is that we tend to look at these things in little units a week apart. This tends to make us read the stories as isolated incidents rather than a flow of thoughts and ideas. Sometimes we need to step back and look at the bigger picture and find the passage in the context of the overall whole. We begin by looking at what it is that comes before and after.

Preceding this passage is the story of the ambition of the Sons of Zebedee, James and John which led to Jesus great statement, "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" And following this story is the great entry into Jerusalem. It makes no sense to include this story at this point, unless it relates to either what came before or after. Since the passages that follow are the beginning of the Easter story, then we can only assume that the purpose of this story was to illustrate what it was that went before.

So then it is about serving, about how Jesus served.

So let us begin and look at the story through the eyes of a first century Jew. Jesus was on the way to the big event in Jerusalem. He left Jericho with a purpose, and by now he was extremely popular and the crowds massed around him. Through the babble of the crowd came the voice of the man - "Have mercy on me?" The disciples and those following wanted him silent but he became more insistent and louder. Jesus stopped and called for him. Perhaps it is only if you have been where are beggars, that you can begin to understand the significance of this. It is so easy to walk on by without noticing.

Think of the good Samaritan story. The priest and levite were not bad people, but they were important people, travelling with a purpose and this gave them an excuse to walk by on the other side.

Think of this story - Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to fulfil the purpose of his incarnation - his date with destiny. He too could have walked by. But the point is, he didn't.

Here is our first lesson in service. It is about putting the need of the other into first place no matter how important is the thing that we are doing. We are not called to stand on ceremony - but rather take hold of the random opportunities to serve someone in need.

Is this the shape of our church family? Sure it is one thing to serve, but often this is done on our terms and to suit our needs. The extra mile is about putting ourselves out, beyond duty to help those in need. We cannot say to God, "I am available but only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Friday afternoons". A servant in Jesus time was always on hand. It was not a job but a calling.

The true heart of service knows no self. Perhaps our society has lost this understanding as servants are no longer common place. To serve means that we are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

When Jesus heard the cry he responded.

How often do we not hear this cry or choose to ignore it? With television there is an unprecedented opportunity to know what is happening in the world, but with the information overload, we tend to do nothing. While in Cressy, we had the privilege of Bishop Mano from Pakistan staying with us, and he told just small parts of the story of being a Christian in his country. We have it easy here, believe me. We can become so engrossed in our own problems that we do see the need for any action elsewhere. The true heart of service listens for the needs of others.

Finally, Jesus engaged Bartimaeus on his terms. He made no assumptions - "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks, allowing the other to set the agenda. How often do we take on service - "Knowing what is good for them"?

This is more than just a division of labour, but a reminder that there is essential worth - even in the blind beggar and the question allow him the dignity of humanity. The true heart of service respects the one who is served.

So this is more than just a nice story to entertain the kids, but a challenge about how we are to serve. Service is a serious business and if we are to follow in the steps of our master, it is our business. It is probably worth reflecting as a Ministry Unit, how we are serving our community. It is not just the actions that are important but the attitudes that lie beneath. Perhaps these questions are the beginning of this process.

- ◆ Are we fitting in service around our schedule or making it a top priority?
- ◆ Are we ignoring the cries of the needy or listening carefully to seek them out.
- ◆ Are we setting the agenda of service or allowing the served their say.

AMEN