

Disciples walk by faith

The Last Sunday after Trinity

Proper 25

Sunday between 23 and 29 October inclusive

During the summer I was stood here one Sunday morning with many of you worshipping in this amazing building and I felt sad. Sad at even the thought that it might not be possible to keep this place going, sad at the thought of the decades of faithful worshippers who have strived to keep it as a place of prayer and singing and study and barn dances and luncheon clubs and messy church – the list goes on, you know it far better than me. But like Bartimaeus, wanting to keep on the roadside when you've had a call to Go!, when you can see a way ahead that will bring freedom and life and hope and energy and excitement, that surely has to be considered at least. That is just what your elected DCC has bravely decided upon, not that it was easy, not that some might be fearful of what lies ahead, deeply concerned at a loss of identity. Nevertheless courage is

required of the believer and it involves action whilst scared – courage is action whilst scared.

Disciples walk by faith not sight, our mind's eye or perhaps our soul guides us as we draw on scripture reason tradition and experience – these are the beliefs we have formed over time and they are very powerful. To walk with Jesus requires tenacity, persistence – whoever thought of it as an emotional crutch clearly didn't know the trauma of Jesus facing the cup of wrath in the garden of Gethsemane. God's followers will need inner strength that is, resilience.

Recently I attended a resilience course focussing on what will help us maintain a healthy work life blend, not balance notice because sometimes things get a bit manic, but we need to attend to our cycles of recovery. That's Psychologists speak for a Sabbath, but nevertheless I gained some valuable insights into what's known in the trade as cognitive behavioural therapy, CBT, it's a sort of reprogramming of our thought processes, but which can also be located in biblical principles: running the race, the Lord is my strength, when I

am weak you are strong, renew your mind by meditating on the Word of life, the deeds the Lord has done, remind one another of why we follow Christ and what confidence we can have in him as leader.

Inner strength is what we all need to journey with Jesus, to walk the way of disciple, not to remain sitting by the roadside, but throwing off our cloak, responding to his call, then to find courage to keep going, to throw off those things that ensnare us, be it our cloak, our riches, our traditions.

Time and again in the bible I notice that it's a right attitude not results or a perfect understanding that Jesus is impressed by, faith not in one's own ability to believe seven impossible things before breakfast, rather, trust in the one who can do immeasurably more than we can know or imagine.

Those who use their talents wisely to God's glory are rewarded with greater responsibility and challenge, but are equipped by Him to carry out the task. How daunting must it have been for Bartimaeus to persist despite being sternly told to

shut up. What vision, what insight, what courage to leave behind what was probably a lucrative income begging by a busy roadside in Jericho especially when hoards were congregating for the annual Passover. I suggest the pilgrims might well have felt a stronger than usual obligation to the visible presence of a beggar.

What we feed our minds with affects our perspective our understanding our vision – this is well understood of course by the advertising industry. Ideas fuel responses. Yet, if it's true that we walk by faith not sight, then why strive for spiritual insight at all? The Christian journey can be thought of as 'faith seeking understanding'. Amazingly God chooses to reveal His purposes and plans to us, but only how and when He chooses which can be frustrating to say the least! Spiritual insight will develop our wisdom and discernment so that we behave in a more Christlike way. In spiritual terms, we walk by faith, step out courageously, and only then does God reveal the bigger picture to us. God makes sense in

retrospect, and even then details of the plan are often revealed at the last minute.

Corrie Ten Boom likened it to being told to go on a train journey. You show up at the station not knowing your destination and only then does God tell you where you're going. Then you find the platform and just as the train is about to pull away, does God give you the tickets to journey. Resources appear only just as you need them, just when you feared they wouldn't turn up. Such experiences hone our ability to trust and follow, stretch our spiritual muscles, exercise our souls, sharpen our vision, inspire our hearts.

Talking of trains, imagine you're the only person in a railway carriage except one other person right at the other end. They're facing you but their head is down. Suddenly they raise their eyes in your direction and laugh. What goes through your mind? [Talk to your neighbour for a moment]

Is the person laughing at your big nose, do they think your clothes are ridiculous, have you got something stuck to your face that's amusing. Perhaps, perhaps not. Could there be other

possibilities, other explanations? They might have thought of something amusing, are they sat opposite someone you can't see who's made a joke? These ideas are automatic thoughts, or fascinatingly for person of faith, one's 'beliefs'. These have been developed as internal tapes playing in your head.

What follows are consequences which arise in the form of emotions behaviours and psychological reactions. What we have is an ABC – Activating Event, Beliefs and Consequences. Shining a light on this behaviour can empower us to respond to situations in a more measured controlled balanced way then merely responding to our 'fight or flight' instinct.

Running our gospel reading through this model, Jesus arrives in town – the Activating Event. What is the belief? Bartimaeus has a set of thoughts running through his head- such as, this is the messiah, he can forgive my sins, he can teach, he does miracles, he will overthrow the empire, he can choose to restore my sight. What then is the C for Consequences –. What's his behaviour – he

shouts, throws off his cloak, walks boldly to Jesus and makes his request. His belief has inspired action for which he is commended, it has revealed to Jesus that he has a correct vision, a right perspective of the order of things, understood the very nature of Jesus identity. The blind man sees his real need is for forgiveness his sight was a nice-to-have.

The response of this son of Timaeus is rare and serves as a model of discipleship. Faith seeking understanding has been used to describe the life of the disciple. Over time with resilience and persistence, we will know more of the mind of Christ and hence view the world through his eyes and therefore respond in a way that Jesus would. Bartimaeus is determined, persistent and humble.

More typically, when faced with an activating event many of us have automatic thoughts which cloud our vision. We fall into habits of seeing things using only a few of the same ideas. A philosopher said once that most people think they are thinking when in fact all they're doing is rearranging their prejudices. We can get caught in mind traps –

these set us on a course of action that is not founded in truth but in skewed perception. Examples of mind traps are as follows,

- ‘catastrophising’ or forming conclusions based on isolated events; worst case scenario
- ‘polarised-thinking’ involving all-or-nothing (black or white thinking)
- ‘should’ based on an internal list of self-created demands about how you believe you should be others should be and life should be like.
- ‘personalising’ – thinking everything centres around us

On the resilience course we were invited to score ourselves against the various mind traps and so when it came to ‘catastrophising’ I scored myself quite low. I don’t do that. I don’t leap to worst case scenario, far too measured, analytical, moderate. Having looked again at my automatic responses, my beliefs to a situation last year when I thought aghhhh I’m going to lose my job it was clear my score for catastrophizing needed to be higher!

Did you think the person in the train carriage was laughing at you? That's an example of the mind trap known as 'Personalising' – thinking everything that happens is centred around us.

Simply by becoming aware that all of us can fall into these mind-traps will help us realise that our perceptions, our responses and sight is getting clouded and we might need to revisit situations especially in light of what we learn from scripture and as it were reprogram our minds. This in terms of what Jesus offers the disciple is the gradual transformation of self and society into the likeness of Christ. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Whatever is excellent or praiseworthy think on these things, says the bible

For the Christian, scholars have realised that beliefs are formed in of four ways:

reason, experience, scripture and tradition,
[repeat]

If ever there was an 'Activating Event' it's announcing on a Sunday morning in church that we have decided to consider seriously the idea of joining with forces with our neighbouring church

and re-order the building in which we now stand. This will trigger in all of us a set of beliefs that are formed out of reason – how we think, out of experience, what we've witnessed from the past, out of scripture, what we know to be true about God, and out of tradition, or the cultural norms in which we are immersed. How we journey in our hearts and minds from B our beliefs to C our consequences, that is our emotions and actions will be affected by mind traps.

I am well aware that our responses will reflect our personalities and character, that some of us rightly see things more with our heads and others more with our hearts – both are valid. As I mentioned earlier, I have felt sad myself at the possibility of this place of worship coming to an end. At other times my head tells me it seems to be God directing it and that the timing is right. That doesn't make it easier but appears to be the right thing to do, at least to explore it seriously.

The rich man couldn't give up his wealth to follow Jesus, Bartimaeus by contrast gave up his livelihood as a beggar and confessed his need for

forgiveness. Once Jesus had said 'Go' only then did he receive his sight. Courage is acting whilst feeling scared. Only once Jesus had said Go! did Bartimaeus receive his sight. What I see from each congregation is a convergence of vision – desire to fulfil spiritual growth, mission and pastoral care. To achieve this we will need to release more energy than is currently available. That, I truly believe can be realised by joining forces and being stronger together, as iron sharpens iron, as parts of the same body, as an army ready to battle together.

Let's walk by faith not sight, courageously stepping out into the unknown but exciting future and let's see what God does with that.

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