

## HOMELESSNESS

Js 2:1-5; Lk 18:35-43

Have you ever thought that Jesus is the only person in history who was able to choose where he would be born? And what did HE choose? He chose a simple stable – quite possibly a place where the homeless people of his day might find shelter for the night. And as an adult Jesus says, ‘Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’

Our gospel reading tells of the blind beggar and his meeting with Jesus. Mark in his gospel identifies the blind beggar as Bartimaeus - meaning **son of** Timaeus. Here is a beggar – he’s a social misfit, a drop out, probably homeless – but he’s still **somebody’s son**; the son of Timaeus. And nothing can change that. He isn’t simply a man of the road; he didn’t come from the street; he came from a mother and father.

When we see a homeless person, it’s easy, isn’t it, to forget that this person was and is somebody’s child. This person was born into the world like each of us. He or she was born into a family, and what is more they were born in the image of God. And because of that I need to give them respect – to respect them as a fellow creation of God.

James tells us in his letter, ‘Never treat people in different ways according to their appearance’. Treat the poor person in his rags the same as you would treat the rich man with his gold ring and fine clothes. That’s what Jesus did, wasn’t it? Respect for everyone, including those that others ignored or despised -the leprosy sufferers; the prostitutes, the tax collectors; the children.

Jesus’ question to Bartimaeus is interesting: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Wasn’t it obvious what Bartimaeus needed? But Jesus respected him enough not to assume what he needed. Usually we think we know what beggars want, don’t we? But we may be quite wrong in our assumptions. We may assume their greatest need is for food or shelter. But what seems to be the obvious thing may not always be the right thing. Maybe their deepest need is to have someone to speak to; someone who will listen to their story. So Jesus shows his respect for Bartimaeus by asking him what it is that he wants, rather than just assuming that He knows what he needs.

When Jesus stopped in response to Bartimaeus’ cry that day he was on his way to Jerusalem. There He would make His triumphal entry into the city and then face the agony of the following week. So many things must have been pressing in on his mind. Yet in amidst all of this He makes time for a lowly beggar. It reminds us that everyone is important to the Lord – and should be to us too.

After hearing Jesus call him, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and runs to Jesus. That cloak was probably his most valuable possession. By night it was his tent and shelter from the elements; by day he would spread it out for his begging and in the evening draw it up as a fisherman would draw up his net for the day’s catch. But Bartimaeus leaves it behind; his ultimate trust is not in material things. In Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, But Luke says simply, ‘Blessed are the poor...’

From a worldly point of view the poor are certainly NOT blessed. But from a spiritual point of view, they have the blessing that they are more likely to look to God. They do not trust in material things, simply because they have so little. We read in the letter of James, ‘God chose the poor people of this world to be rich in faith, and to possess the Kingdom, which He promised to those who love Him’.

When Jesus was born, the angel proclaims to the shepherds, ‘I bring you good news...’ Those shepherds were some of the poorest in that society. The message of Jesus was much more likely to be good news to those humble shepherds, than it would be to the rich. When Jesus begins His ministry, He quotes these words from Isaiah, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has chosen Me to bring good news to the poor...’

We as the Church are here to continue the ministry of Jesus. We as the Church are here to bring good news to the poor, the homeless. How are we doing?

There are something like 320 000 homeless people in the UK at the moment, some of them in our community. Are there things that we can be doing as a church? Lunchbox uses our hall and kitchen on a Wednesday and does a wonderful job providing a meal for between 20 and 40 needy people, as well as food parcels that people can take with them. Might it be possible to work alongside them to provide other services – maybe a shower where people can have a wash; maybe a washing machine and tumble drier for people to clean their clothes; maybe have a social worker on site to offer advice or counselling. I'm sure that sounds unrealistic. But if a church is going to have a significant impact it will mean going out on a limb, out of our comfort zones. I read in a book recently, 'More than a vision for our church we need a vision for our community. It's not about being the best church **in** the town, but rather about being the best church **for** the town.'

Jesus entered fully into our human experience – He became one with us in the fullest sense. He asks us to do something similar with those in the world around us. It is not an easy thing to do, but He assures us that a great blessing accompanies it, for when we do such things, we meet Jesus there. 'Inasmuch as you do these things to the least of these, you do them for me.' In giving food or shelter or companionship, says Jesus, we are meeting Him in those to whom we reach out.

There was no room for Jesus that first Christmas. Will there be room for Jesus this time around?