

## *Jesus changes lives*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 28 Oct 2012

*Jeremiah 31: 7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7: 21-28; Mark 10: 46-52*

A friend of mine was the Navy chaplain on HMAS Kanimbla, on disaster relief at Banda Aceh in Indonesia after the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004. You may recall that the epicentre of the earthquake was not far off the coast of Banda Aceh, so the wave was biggest there. My friend told me about meeting a man who was the only survivor from his town of 5000 people. This man escaped by quickly climbing a tall tree when the sea commenced its long withdrawal—the unmistakable early-warning sign of a coming Tsunami. But as for the others, most of them just stood there on the beach and watched the nightmare roaring down on them. The man told my friend that with all the dark-coloured sand sucked out by the ocean, the enormous wave when it appeared was black, and he said it reared up in the shallows like a cobra. It seems we're so used to the comfortable, familiar world that we think nothing will change, let alone go badly wrong. I remember Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wondering why so many went off quietly to the Gulag when the KGB came for them—why they didn't protest more. It seems we regularly fail to take Dylan Thomas' advice, to 'go not gently into that Good night'.

So it's encouraging in our Gospel today to see someone who did indeed 'Rage against the dying of the light'. Blind Bartimaeus is one of those iconic Gospel figures with a lot more to tell us than just a success story from the annals of optometry. He's an urgent believer that Jesus can change lives, and he acts accordingly. Did you notice the mention of this blind beggar's cloak being thrown aside in his haste to get up and stumble toward Jesus? Not only did poor people sleep in their cloaks, but blind beggars put them out on the ground for people to throw their coins on for the beggar to readily gather up, so that none were lost. For the blind beggar to abandon his cloak, and hence the mainstay of his financial security, says something about his faith in Jesus, and in the new future, the new security, that Jesus brings.

This is the faith of Israel in a new manifestation. The God of Jeremiah who reverses the tragic fortunes of God's people, according to our first reading today, joins with the Psalmist who celebrates that transformation with laughter and singing. And as Hebrews testifies today, Jesus has become the great high priest, the great mediator, of God's blessings for God's people. This is the Jesus we meet in word and sacrament week by week, who invites us in prayer and Christian fellowship and through confession and pastoral counsel to know him and trust him and let our lives be changed by him. Because it does happen.

Bartimaeus knows that the sad inevitabilities, the prisons of our past, are not necessarily forever, and he casts care to the wind in pursuing that belief. He will not settle for things as they've been, now that he knows liberation has come within reach in the person of Jesus. In faith he springs into action, like the man in Banda Aceh springing up that tree, while a whole world entranced by the status quo was swept away around him.

Something important to notice about this wonderful little story of Bartimaeus is its strategic location in Mark's Gospel. It comes at the end of a long section that begins in Chapter 9 with the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. The disciples don't understand the vision they've seen on the mountaintop, and who Jesus is, and how Jesus has now become the focus of faith in God, attended by Moses and Elijah as witnesses from the Old Testament. But at the end of that long section it's the blind man who plainly sees. In the same way, Bartimaeus serves as the bookend in Mark's story to another encounter Jesus has, earlier in Chapter 10, with the man who refuses to follow him, because he can't let go of his attachment to wealth as a marker of

status—the man I talked to you about two weeks back. What a contrast: the status-conscious man who clings to the security and identity his wealth provides and refuses Jesus' offer of a new life, set against the poor blind beggar who threw security to the wind—literally, when he threw off his cloak—and clung to Jesus with passionate belief in a new future. Friends, the invitation and the challenge to you and to me could not be clearer.

What stops us so often is simply our not knowing or believing that things can be different, and perhaps also our not appreciating the risk we face if we resist the offer of repentance and new life that God extends to us in Jesus. I'm not saying God will damn us to hell, but I am saying that hell is what we'll obviously prefer when the time comes, if in this present life we're stuck in business as usual, cynical about new possibilities at best and actively resistant to them at worst. I'm reminded here of C.S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce*, writing about hell as an endless, grey English midlands town where it's constantly raining, but the residents choose to stay. They can go on regular bus trips to heaven, but they don't like it there because it's too bright and colourful and the grass is so sharply alive it hurts their feet, and they don't want to stay. One of them is a deceased Anglican bishop, who's eager to get back on the bus and return to the grey town where he has a little theological discussion group, whistling as he goes the hymn 'City of God how broad and far'. The saddest thing about hell, I think, is that it will be full of people quite content to be there, who can see and smell heaven but who for whatever reason prefer not to go there.

Perhaps it'll be our familiar sins and bad habits, or our long established compromises with second best, that'll hold us back. A different life is just too much for all of us some of the time and for some of us all of the time. Some people are genuinely evil, of course, having long committed themselves to lives of bitterness, envy and predatory nastiness—even violence. But others are damned by the cold sins of unimaginative complacency, paralysing fear or else defeated resignation. The old self is too comfortable; the new self is too vulnerable, too unfamiliar, too risky. But remember the good news written all over our readings today, as ever in the words and actions of the Eucharist: that our transformation is God's act from first to last, God's will, God's gift to us and God's love for us in action. It's not something we have to achieve for ourselves, though we do have to accept the gift and task of being transformed.

So let our guide be that irrepressible truant Bartimaeus, who saw his chance with Jesus and needed no further encouragement. For whatever reason, the regular state of many individuals is to stand with the doomed on that Indonesian beach, waiting for who knows what, but refusing to budge. Friends, there's no future in it.