

The Last Sunday after Trinity: *Following in the Way*

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52

Think: what makes you recognise somebody as a leader and want to follow them ...? Surely it must be something to do with *trust*. Trust, and the sense that this leader knows where they're going, and that it's worth going to.

So why do we *follow Jesus* – or at least try to – or at least claim to? Where does the trust come from? Is it attraction to Jesus as a person - or even attraction to the music his Church has inspired? Is it just to do with my upbringing, or the friends I make? Do we follow because of careful thought and reasoning? because of emotional conversion? Or is it a direct personal calling to follow?

It could be any of those, it doesn't really matter; though actually, that last one, the direct personal calling, may be quite rare. You might have a picture of Jesus going round Galilee and saying to all and sundry 'Follow me!' But in the whole of St Mark's Gospel, which we're hearing week by week this year, Jesus asks precisely *six people* to follow him. One is Levi the tax-collector; four are the fishermen Simon and Andrew, James and John. They all respond to the call. The sixth is the rich man we heard about in the gospel a fortnight ago; but he didn't follow Jesus, he went away grieving.

No, in this gospel Jesus tells people to go away much more often than he tells them to follow. As with this blind beggar outside Jericho. 'Go' says Jesus; but instead Bartimaeus followed.

And it's easy to see *why* he did. There he was by the roadside, longing to see: 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' The officious disciples tell him to shut up. But Jesus says 'Call him here', and Bartimaeus jumps up. And, did you notice, he throws off his cloak – that's his one vital possession, for keeping him warm, but also for collecting his pennies. Nothing in his hand, only his need: 'Teacher, let me see again!' 'Go' says Jesus; 'your faith has made you well.'

And the blind beggar receives sight, he receives mercy. Jesus had said 'Go', but he jumps up again and, Mark says, 'he followed him on the way'.

That word 'way' (or 'path', or 'road') is very significant. It crops up again and again in this second half of St Mark's Gospel. It refers literally to the road that Jesus is walking up to Jerusalem. But it's also the word used by the early Christians for what we'd now call their religion: the Way of Christ, the way of life Jesus teaches and lives and leads, the way of salvation. Bartimaeus 'followed him on the Way.'

Where does this Way lead? That story is the very last encounter St Mark recounts before Jesus enters Jerusalem and that part of the road is over. But his way continues. It leads to demonstration and disputes in the temple; to a

bitter supper in the upper room; to agony and arrest in the garden; to jeers and condemnation at the tribunal; to wood and nails and death on Golgotha ...

That arduous road is the way this blind beggar has stumbled on *without* being called to follow. It's the way that we blind beggars are baptised into, whatever strange and various paths have led us on to it. It's not the way of the world. No, the Way of Jesus, the Way of utter, endlessly patient love and truth and faithfulness.

And of course we stumble on the way and wander from it, because it is hard, and many give up. But 'I am going to bring them back ...' we heard the prophet say in the name of God, back in the days when his people were scattered and exiled. 'I am going to gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return here ... I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble ...' A great company ... a joyful communion.

So pray God we continue to follow Jesus. For Golgotha is not the end of the road. Christ is risen, and here and now we eat and drink with him, and with Bartimaeus, and with all that diverse and crazy Communion of saints and sinners.

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