

Sermon and Prayers for October

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Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

The Book Ends

When I was a young teenager, I had a pair of book ends, fine big elephants from Africa, which were central on the mantelpiece of my bedroom. And every month or so I hand-picked some favourite books that would be my bedtime reading. There were always one or two Scottish ones. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, perhaps, and I went through a John Buchan craze, reading them all, especially the Richard Hannay ones. We used to have home readers at school, one per term. *Jane Eyre* or *Pride and Prejudice* would be fine. But Dickens was sometimes a long read and so was Sir Walter Scott for a young teenager. So I would have a Chalet School book or the Broons Annual or Agatha Christie in there. And even at that age I enjoyed theology and there might have been a C. S. Lewis – *The Screwtape Letters*, for example. And of course there were usually the three weekly library books from the Public Library. My books were important to me. And something of my life and thought and development was there, between the book ends.

The story from Mark's gospel is a book end. It closes a series of events in the life of Jesus. There are two book ends, the one that starts the series of events and the one that closes the series. The book ends are both stories of blind men being given their sight. The first person is a nameless man at Bethsaida in Galilee. That's the first book end. The second book end is also concerning a blind man, he is the son of Timaeus. And in between the two book ends, Jesus moves slowly from his own area of the Galilee to Jerusalem, for the last time.

The progression, the pilgrimage, the journey, is not just a physical one, along dusty miles. It is

a progression in development of understanding and thought and dedication. What are the events between the book ends?

Straight after the first man receives his sight, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. The disciples are taught about bearing the cross. There is the Transfiguration on the mountain top, indicating so much more than meets the eye. There is teaching about the meaning of Christ's death, the importance of the child, the essential nature of service. It turns all the values of this world upside down – the weak and vulnerable are to be made central, the first shall be last, the rich must give away their money, the greatest must be servant of all. And the Messiah will be mocked, flogged and killed – and will rise again. Each of them, from Judas to Jesus, is engaged on an individual and private pilgrimage as well as the journey they all shared.

And at the end of that long walk, just before Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, there is the second book end, the healing of blind Bartimeus.

I am perfectly happy to believe that two blind men were given their sight as a healing gift from Jesus. I also believe that when Mark wrote this book he was not pouring facts in a disorganized way onto a shopping list or an exam script. He arranged his material with very great care and selected from a copious and good memory the events that were of real importance. It's a sort of Desert Island Disc selection. These are not *all* the things he could remember. These are the things he could remember that *were of great significance*. He set them down in such a way that readers would also see, not just the story, not just the teaching, but the context and the order and the significance. So the healing of the

blind man put in at this point is important. What do these book end stories say to us today? What about the journey between the book ends?

1. First, we are reminded that *we are on the move*. We are developing. These events remind us and declare to us that each of the thirteen named people were growing and developing and sometimes painfully discarding old ideas and embracing new ones. Not just the road from Galilee to Jerusalem was travelled. It was a road of developing ideas and new thoughts. It was a journey into new visions of God and new challenges of how they should live themselves. It was a frightening picture of life without Jesus. And for Jesus it was also a growing awareness of his destiny and inevitable suffering.

Where are you on the journey? Do you believe in the same way as you always have? Or have you changed and developed? Are you letting new ideas in? Are you letting old ideas go? There may be some people here who do not want to change or feel they are too old to take on new ideas. You must go at your pace – but do not close your mind to new ideas.

There may be someone here whose faith is being shaken to the core. You may be discarding beliefs that were all right as a child. You may be searching for mature faith. Fine. That is what the journey is all about.

We *must* discard. The Christian church does not teach that the world was created in six days. Some of the best stories in the Bible are not history, they are story. They are *true* but not because they are fact. They are true because the story contains eternal truth. The Bible is not a book of magic and proof texts. The Bible is a book of profound truth which challenges us to think about what is going on in the world and in our lives.

In the book of Job, that magnificent story, (and it is a story) Job believes that his wealth and affluence is all because he is good. (We still think like that. How many of us look at the homeless on the streets and think ‘it’s *their own fault*’?) When Job loses everything he is angry with God and demands everything

back. Eventually he breaks out of the baby faith he had. He acknowledges that God is God. And he begins to understand something of the mystery and grandeur of God. And he also learns to throw out the window, some of the garbage he had believed all these years without thinking. He realizes that some of his ‘faith’ was just naive rubbish. So, we learn from the journey between the book ends that we too should be moving and changing and questioning and allowing God to change us.

2. Secondly, we learn that *our eyes constantly must to be opened*. I think Mark put in the two stories of the blind men having eyes opened to show that the journey itself was an eye-opener. The people there didn’t want eyes to be opened. The Christian journey is an eye-opener. At every point we are called to open our eyes. It is so much easier to keep our eyes closed. Not to get upset. Not to do anything. If we would follow Jesus on this pilgrimage, we should open our eyes.

To what is going on in our hearts.

To what is going on in our relationships.

To what is going on in the world.

To ask questions about poverty and trade.

To look at the waste of food and energy in our affluent society.

To look at areas of war and aggression.

And always to say, ‘Why?’

If you would enter into Jerusalem with Jesus, *open your eyes*.

3. The third thing to note from this book end story is that *the cry of the nameless poor did not go unheeded*. The uncontrolled shouting of the blind man was outrageous. Shut him up. Keep him quiet. The teacher is coming. Listen to that shout. How embarrassing. How disgraceful. How disturbing.

If this story tells us nothing else it should hammer home the message that the cries of the nameless poor should not go unheeded. They are everywhere and all around us. And sometimes I feel that the whole of the press conspires to say as the crowd did to the blind man, ‘Hold your tongue!’ ‘Hold your tongue!’

- Before the war on Iraq began, the biggest marches ever held in Britain demonstrated against going to war. And we were told 'Hold your tongue!' The casualties are still unknown but thousands of people have been killed. Why?
- Thousands of people have demanded fair trade for the most indebted nations. We have constantly asked for the cancellation of debts. Much has been promised. Some has been done. But still, disgracefully, about 30,000 children die daily unnecessarily. If

we protest we are told, 'Hold your tongue!' 'Hold your tongue!'

Whenever the chief news items are of late trains or political scandal or hose pipe bans, I want to shout, 'What is really going on?' 'What is happening in the world that we are NOT being told about?'

Blind Bartimaeus. It is a book end to close the journey to Jerusalem. For the disciples and for us, it is a reminder that we are on a journey, that we must open our eyes, and however disturbing, we must listen to the cries of others.

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, we come,
believing that you have called us,
and with all our doubts and fears,
longings and difficulties, we bow our heads before
you.

All that clutters our minds and hearts,
we bring before you.
All that hinders us from truly worshipping,
we bring before you.
All that stops us from leading a good life,
we bring before you.
All that stops us from moving forward in
Christian faith,
we bring before you.

We bring our worries,
about our family, and people we love,
about our work, the unreasonable demands and
impossible targets,
about money and mortgages and debt,
about our health and our future
and great decisions that have to be made.

And we bring to you our sin.
Our dishonesty and unkindness,
our resentment and bitterness,
our lack of joy and of love....
In the quietness and peace
of this time of worship,
we seek your presence and power
to deliver us from fear and sin.
As you raised Christ from death to life,

so raise us from our brokenness.

Liberate us, in mind and spirit,
to receive your gracious word,
and to live in your strength and by your grace,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord, AMEN

Prayers for Others

Dear God, like Job,
we question you and seek to know you face to
face.

Like Bartimaeus,
we call to you from our blindness.
Take the blindness from us
that we may recognise your love in the world
around us.

Open our ears that we may be aware of other
people crying.

Loving God,
we bring to you those who are closest to our
hearts.
Family and friends and those who lie easily in our
care.

We bring those who are special in a less obvious
way –
the unborn child,
the new relationship,
tiresome teenagers who would not be children but
are not adults,
and we bring our insecurity as situations change
around us.
Hold us steady and true and keep us and them in
your love.

We know of places where there is constant war,
 We think of the Palestinians, prisoners in their
 own land
 surrounded by machines of war.
 We pray that those who have for centuries been
 persecuted,
 your ancient people the Jews,
 may become aware of injustice and become
 committed to equality.
 May the two nations and the three religions
 learn to live in peace and truth and charity.

Enable us to see your world
 with the brightness of healed Bartimaeus.
 May we see the jewelled colours of
 leaf and shell and wing.
 And the filth and the greed and the hunger.
 And the struggles for power and oil and
 position.
 Give us strength to cry out. Hear our cries and
 our tears.
 Draw close with your salvation.
 We ask these things in Jesus' name, AMEN.

HELP FOR PREACHERS

Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year B* (London: SPCK, 2005. £8.99. pp. vii + 129. ISBN 0-281-05529-9).

William F. Brosend II, Deborah Krause, Daniel N. Schowalter and Mark Vitalis Hoffman, *New Proclamation Year B 2005-2006: Advent Through Holy Week* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005. £14.99. pp. viii + 264. ISBN 0-8006-4253-8).

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Preachers rarely have the time they would like to prepare their sermons. They are also unlikely to maintain a library of commentaries as up-to-date as that at a university or seminary. So well-researched lectionary resources can be invaluable. There are, however, many already available. What might these two have to offer?

This is Williams' third and last book in a series offering reflections on the three main lectionary texts for Sundays. They were initially published as a column in the *Church Times*. Each one is accessible and pastoral, and shows how the passages fit into the wider Christian message, reflecting Williams' own specialism in Christian doctrine. She writes as a preacher who wears her learning lightly. Her approach is essentially Ignatian, drawing the reader into the biblical texts by imaginative engagements. The reflections include 'A puzzled seeker' (third Sunday of Easter), 'Peter's tale' (Fourth Sunday before Advent) and persons A, B and C responding to Jesus' teaching on the great commandments (Proper 16). This is not a commentary offering elucidations on critical questions, but rather a resource for preachers who wish to draw their congregations into the divine drama and encourage them to co-operate with God.

Brosend and his co-authors take a more robustly scholarly approach. They consider all the texts set for the *Revised Common Lectionary*, the Roman Catholic lectionary and the *Book of Common Prayer*, even commenting on the Psalms, in a format that has been running for twenty-five years. It is a workbook, with background information, explanations of key Hebrew and Greek words, sure-footed exegetical comment and clear applications. Preachers are alerted to critical issues and pointed to the relevant scholars for further discussion. There are also first-rate introductions to each season. They sustain a pastoral warmth as promised in the sub-title *The Essential Pastoral Companion for Preaching*, and come from preachers to preachers. I wish I had come across this series in parish ministry. It is an excellent reference work whose value will long outlast its official 'best-before date' of Easter 2006.

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