

SERMON – 4/8/19

Matthew 20:29-34

“Jesus had pity on them and touched their eyes; at once they were able to see, and they followed him.” (Matthew 20:34)

We stand on the brink of another Family Week in Kinross, a long-standing fixture in the annual calendar of our church and a highlight of the year for many in the wider community. Months of preparation are nearing their completion and a veritable army of volunteers has been mobilised. As backpackers we will be setting off on a journey round Europe and this time tomorrow, we expect to be in full swing. This place will be ringing, we trust, with the happy hubbub of children and young people engaging with the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Most importantly of all, we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will be present in our midst and in that respect there will be a lot of similarities between what is going on here and the episode we read about from Matthew's Gospel a few moments ago when crowds of people thronged in the streets of Jericho straining to hear what Jesus was saying, in the case of Zacchaeus (in Luke's account of that day) trying to find a vantage point just to catch a glimpse of Him; in the case of the two blind beggars trying to make their voices heard above the noise in the hope of attracting His attention. Jesus was simply passing through that town and yet in the space of just a few hours many lives were touched and transformed. Is it not possible that our community and individuals in it will know such a blessing over the coming days? May it please God!

I was reminded this week of a verse from the closing chapter of the Book of Job. Job has been wrestling with unspeakable troubles in his own and in his family's life; having to deal with the not-so-helpful advice of those he thought were his friends. He has been trying to make sense of his situation before God and finally God makes Himself known to Him as a storm rages. Job is given to see that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and God's ways are higher than our ways and as he finally humbles himself, Job says to the Lord, 'I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes.' (Job 42:5)

Those words of Job at the close of what has been for him a tumultuous journey through extreme physical suffering, mental anguish and spiritual

doubt actually could also have been heard on the lips of the blind men in our Gospel reading this morning as they are literally enabled to see the face of God in Jesus Christ after being healed. 'I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes.

Perhaps, like Job or like the blind men in the account we read this morning, you personally have been through difficult times and you may wonder if God, of whom you know by report, is there at all, never mind able to be seen. We live in a time of deep questioning for the institutional church – the Church of Scotland faces catastrophe if we continue to tread the path we are currently on: the number of ministers will plummet in the next few years and if you add a decade to the age range of most congregations then the size and number and spread of the buildings we currently own and upkeep will far outstrip projected needs.

And yet the cries of those in our society who may not even have heard of God by report never mind come face to face with Jesus Christ, are such that there is an unquestionable need for the good news of transformation and life that Christ came to proclaim and to embody and which He has entrusted to us as His followers. There is widespread hopelessness in the population at large – but we have a message of unclouded hope to proclaim. There is a growing darkness in our society, with unspeakable crimes being uncovered with disturbing regularity – but Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, the light that nothing can extinguish. Many are held captive to addictions, many are enslaved by the ever-increasing demands of the world of work – yet it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. We have a Gospel to proclaim and yet we do not seem to be getting the message through to our needy world.

Put yourself into this morning's Gospel reading. If you are a follower of Jesus, you would have been with Him that day, passing through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. It seems to have been quite a successful day because as they were on their way *out* of town, Matthew records for us that with the disciples was 'a large crowd.' You will know what that would look like here in Kinross. Think of some of the events that take place during the year where there is a big crowd – Kinross Show next Saturday, the Boat Race in a few weeks time, sporting events of one kind or another like the half-marathon or the cycling sportive, Remembrance Sunday, the Christmas market down the High Street at the end of November, not to mention

Family Week. I guess that is what it was like in Jericho that day. Of course, as Jesus and the disciples made their way out of the town, onwards towards Jerusalem and the Cross, most of the crowd would fall away and head back to their homes leaving the faithful few to carry on towards the city.

But the two people in our reading – the two blind men – stand out from the crowd. They were at their begging pitch, probably somewhere near the city gate and it seems that something of what had been going on in the city had reached their ears – to use Job's phrase they knew of Jesus 'by report.' Word would undoubtedly go ahead of Jesus so that people in towns and villages that he had not yet been to were excited to welcome him, so the blind men may have heard passing travellers over the preceding months discussing this man. Word would certainly have reached them this day that Jesus was actually right there in Jericho. This was their one and only chance – they had to go for it.

In a way these blind men were less than nobodies. They were perhaps a bit of a community embarrassment, living off donations from travellers arriving from Jerusalem. Well if they were usually regarded as an embarrassment, then they excelled themselves this day, shouting 'Son of David! Have mercy on us, sir!' The crowds may have been *wondering* if this charismatic wandering preacher and healer, who had called Zacchaeus out of a tree and gone to eat at his house, might be the Messiah, but these men actually put that wondering into words, addressing Jesus as Son of David.

Just imagine a similar commotion happening here – not just here in this community but right here in this church, right in the middle of a service. Some well-known local figures not only come in to the service but interrupt what is going on in worship yelling at the visiting preacher to take notice of them and help. How would we react? Wouldn't *this* crowd do exactly the same as the crowd did in Jericho? There would certainly be tuts, maybe some of you would actively tell the person to have a bit more respect and quieten down. If it went on, as surely it would, perhaps those on door duty would step in. What would the preacher do, especially if it was a visiting preacher? In most places there are folk who don't quite conform to social norms but who have found their place within the church family, but it would become clear to the visiting preacher that this was something more

than that. Would they continue speaking from the pulpit and hope that by pretending everything was normal it would stop or that someone else would deal with it? *Would* someone else deal with it? What would *you* do if it was happening where you sit?

I guess we can all imagine how uncomfortable a scene like that would make us feel, but the fact of the matter is that while it may not often happen in a service of worship, it is actually happening all the time in our community. Here in Kinross and across the land, there are many, probably a great many who have a deep sense of yearning for God, who are attracted or intrigued by the person and the message of Jesus Christ but who expect that the church, that crowd of those who have Jesus surrounded and won't let anyone close, will shoo them away if they try to get near and will tell them to hold their tongue if they cry out for Him in an unorthodox way. The sad truth is that they are probably right. We hang on to our way of doing things and for the most part, the world is walking past our church doors. Of course, Jesus doesn't ignore the cries. He didn't ignore the blind men in the episode we read about this morning and He does not dismiss those who in our time are reaching out to Him and who, while they may not be finding Him in our crowd and finding their way into our congregations *are* coming to know *Him* for He is still very much at work in our world if not through us then despite us.

There is something for us to learn from how Christ engages with the blind men. Jesus says, "What do you want me to do for you?" As we seek to respond to need in our community and in the wider world, don't let's assume that we know what the best thing is to do but let us begin by listening to them and listening to God until we hear what it is that the person we are trying to help is actually looking for.

And let us respond to that question ourselves this morning: Christ asks each one of us: "What do you want me to do for you?" Think about that today, search your heart and consider what it is that is your deepest need at this time. Ask, and it will be given to you as, like the blind man, you put your faith in Him. They are given their sight and immediately they join those who are following Jesus out of the town and follow Him. There is nothing they need to stay in Jericho for. Most of the crowd, it has to be said, remain at home. Not everyone can or should leave home to follow Jesus, but

perhaps they too have been touched and changed by their brief encounter with Jesus as He passed through. We don't know.

So we stand on the brink of another Family Week in Kinross. Although *we* know that He is here with us all the time, for some in our community it will be as if Jesus is passing through our town. Some have heard of Him by report and these coming days are an opportunity for folk, young and old alike, to see Him with their own eyes, to encounter Him, to experience His transforming touch on their lives. As members of the crowd, may we be ready for that to be going on among us. May we be actively opening the way for those who ask to get answers, for those who seek to find and for those who are knocking to have the door opened to them. Pray for God to touch and bless many in these days and to leave our whole community changed for the better by this time next week.

“Jesus had pity on them and touched their eyes; at once they were able to see, and they followed him.” Lord, ‘I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes.’ In seeing may we believe and in trusting may we follow.