

Blind Bartimaeus

Last weekend we hired a DVD called the Traitor, an excellent story about international terrorism and spying. Ten year old Willem had been allowed to stay up and watch. And he asked the perfect question in a way that sounded quite innocent. A bomb had gone off at an Embassy, and was reported around the CIA with the words, “a bomb blast has killed 8 Americans!” And Willem looked confused, and simply stated, “it wasn’t only Americans that were killed!” At ten years old, he is left why belonging to one nation should make you more human than belonging to another.

But it is not only on the far side of a movie screen, and it’s not only on the far side of the Atlantic that this perverse logic operates. Many of us will have seen the press coverage given to the British National Party over the last few days. The British National Party, or the BNP, seem to want to protect Britain from the invasion of foreigners! Their leader has criticised Islam, defended a past leader of the Ku Kux Klan, claimed that London is no longer a British City because of all the immigrants! Although, it should be added, he claims not to be a Nazi! But the British National Party do claim to represent us! After all, they represent Christian Britain!

So, he is given a voice on British Television – some complain that he was given a voice there at all. Others complain that he wasn’t heard properly, and that he still deserves his voice. And I suppose, given today’s Bible readings, the questions I want to ask fall along these lines: And let me stress, these are only questions. The first question is that asked by ten year old Willem: why should belonging to one nation make you more human than belonging to another? But there are further questions. When you look at the spirit of the BNP – not the explicit, crude and essentially Nazi-like policies – but at the spirit of the BNP, I want to ask how different it is from the Spirit of other major parties in British politics. I’m not saying there is no difference, so don’t shoot me. I am only asking about the extent of the difference.

Because I know this much. If I were defending the views of the BNP against a representative from New Labour’s government – I could point out how, in practice, they don’t recognise powerless foreign peoples as being as important as British interests. If ten year old Willem saw the effects of British home and foreign policy, he can still genuinely ask, why should belonging to one nation make you more human than belonging to another?

Now, in some sense, it’s easy to do this. We like to think that in Britain, we do things properly. We are caught up in an international economic system that is grossly unfair. We are stuck with global realities that favour us, and trample upon the humanity of others. And anyone who comes into government, with even the very best of intentions, is going to struggle to achieve a world that looks remotely just to the majority of peoples and nations that inhabit this planet. It is easy for us to point the finger at governments, and say – you’re all corrupt!

But I wonder whether the British National Party has to be silenced and condemned, not because it is a atrocious exception to British fair play, but because it is a window into the soul of Britain. I spoke to a journalist writing on homelessness last week, who said precisely the same about the need to end rough sleeping by 2012 – because these people are like a thermometer on the health of our nation. Now, this is not at all to say that we are all rotten and sick past curing and governments and politics are inherently evil and beyond redemption.

Recognition of the Son of David

I suppose that asking these questions is rather an attempt to get a grasp of who we really are and how our world really works. A call to open our eyes, to see what is actually happening in the world around us. Obviously, opening our eyes is a key theme in today's readings:

The restoration of sight for Blind Barthimaeus: It's a fairly straightforward story isn't it? Not a lot to comment upon really? Blind man from Jericho! Hears that Jesus of Nazareth is coming by. So he shouts up for healing! Jesus heals him. Commends him for his faith. And then Barthimaeus follows Jesus. End of story. Everyone's happy. Three cheers for Jesus, and well done Barthimaeus. I suppose the question that I'm left with is this: actually, what faith did Barthimaeus really show? Actually?

If you come from a background where you expect miraculous healing, then if you make yourself believe hard enough that it's going to happen, then God will heal you. And Blind Barthimaeus – well, he must have really believed that this Jesus could do it! To the point where Jesus says, not that his own power has healed him, but that the faith of Barthimaeus has restored his own sight... So the moral of the story is ... make yourself believe that God is going to heal you, and it will happen. And if that doesn't happen – then, well sorry! It's your fault. You can't blame God if your faith wasn't strong enough. Well, hurrah – Barthimaeus is a hero of faith because he believed Jesus could do it! That is why he is commended for his faith... or is it?

The faith of Barthimaeus doesn't have a huge amount to do with the restoration of his sight in the first instance. It has to do with the title that he gives to Jesus, combined with what he expected Jesus to do! He calls out, Jesus, Son of David. Not a lot of people do that. But by calling Jesus of Nazareth the Son of David – he is recognising his Kingship. This is the true heir of the great King who established Israel as a nation. The Son of David is the Messiah, the one who again, is going to destroy the enemies of Israel and turn Israel into a great nation! That was what most people imagined when they heard that title – Son of David, a bloodthirsty, war chief who would batter his way to national glory!

So why does Barthimaeus ask Son of David to have mercy on him? King David himself had put a curse on blind people and banned them from the temple. So why does Barthimaeus, the blind man ask for mercy? That seems to be what attracts the attention of Jesus. And far from cursing him for his blindness, he asks what looks like a stupid question. "What do you want me to do for you?" The answer is obvious isn't it?

Well, not if Jesus is the Son of David. Because everyone knows that the Son of David is a war lord on his way to defeat the Romans. But this blind man can see what others cannot. That the Kingship of this Jesus is not about seizing political power to give one nation ascendancy over others, but about bringing wholeness to the oppressed. And that is precisely the faith that Jesus commends: that he recognised both that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, the liberator of Israel – BUT ALSO – that this liberation comes by means of restoring the oppressed, not destroying the enemy.

And look at the context of this passage. We have just had James and John, who've been knocking around with Jesus for ages and still don't see what this blind man who has never laid eyes on this Jesus can see. That Jesus is not going to LORD his authority over others like

gentiles – not going to be just another bloodthirsty liberator, ready to call down fire on his enemies as James and John had been.

And then the passage that follows this one: Jesus is entering Jerusalem, and people crying out for liberation, crying hosannah, expecting the destruction of the Roman garrison. Blind Barthimaeus has seen what none of those crying Hosannah have seen. That the Messiah will bring liberation, not by war but by healing. Not by destroying powerful enemies, but by bringing wholeness to oppressed people.

What do those who are crying Hosannah want of Jesus? They want Jesus to act as though belonging to one nation makes you more human than belonging to another. They want their enemies destroyed, or at least humiliated. They want to replace the Romans as top dog. They believe that in the eyes of God, belonging to one nation makes you more human than belonging to another.

In spirit, what is the difference between that cry for Hosannah, and the British National Party's objectives?

In spirit, what is the difference between that cry for Hosannah, and the line from that film – that the only worthy life is an American life.

In Spirit, what is the difference between that cry for Hosannah, and so much our nation's domestic and foreign policy, that favours us over inhabitant of other nations?

Blind Barthimaeus has seen that the political leadership of Israel's Messiah is about the restoration of real people, not using power to promote one people above another. And the Messiah has all the power he needs to bring healing, and restoration to people. That is the power he wields. This Jesus does not believe that belonging to one nation makes you more human than belonging to another – he is about restoring humanity.

And how does that look, in practice? It looks like precisely the kind of healing we see in this passage – the restoration of a blind man, who comes to follow this Jesus. This is not simply a spiritual or physical act: it is a political one! It demonstrates a way of being human and it results in gathering followers. It is not about going straight to those in power, declaring that the Romans were oppressive as we might want to point the finger at our own government and say they are oppressive. Political justice is not sought by displacing those in power so that a new party can build a new and better world. How many times have we seen that in world history – a new party, hungry for justice, comes to power – and within a generation is more oppressive and unjust than its predecessor! How often does a once persecuted minority come to be a horrendous persecutor of others?

According to today's readings, it is in treating human beings as human beings that political justice comes. No short term happy ending. No short cut to a world where everything is okay! The reading from Job confirms this. Okay, we heard the reading and it gave a lovely, satisfying happy ever after! And I almost wish the lectionary didn't use this reading. Because it is easy to forget that these words did not come in Job chapter 2. They came in chapter 42 – after Job had endured injustice for an intolerable period of time. After Job had come to believe in his bones that there is no justice. But justice came for Job, eventually, and in the long term.

And this is what we see in the story of Jesus. No attempt to seize control of Jerusalem and build a better world. Instead, an entry into Jerusalem in the knowledge that what happened there would inevitably drag him through hell. A knowledge that self sacrifice for the sake of

humanity, would be the genuine path to a justice that brought a wholeness to humanity that could never be achieved by a new political party or a new form of government or a new David on the throne of Israel.

In reality, this Messiah, this Son of David, brings a new way of being human. Not that of seizing power and asserting goodness – but that of total self-giving love. Not in some fluffy nice fake sugar-coated hugs and kisses vomit-inducing Christianised sentimentalism – but in down to earth, people-centred, sacrificial, risky, political commitment.

This is a way of being human and a way of being political that is not going to be fundamentally deconstructed by a simple question from a ten year old boy. This is not a programme that is going to give the kind of immediate, measurable results that Job was never granted. This Jesus does not invite us to fix the injustice of the world. This is a Jesus who invites us to follow him. If we follow this Jesus, who knows what the results will be!