

The People He Met on the Way

Reflections for Holy Week 2023



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Palm Sunday – Bartimaeus: He made me see (Mark 10:46-52)

He made me see. It was the only thing I wanted, and he was the only one who could do it for me. And he did.

No, I'm not local. I'm from Jericho. Until a few days ago, I'd never been anywhere else. Day after day, I sat by the side of the road, and heard the people going past, and hoped that at least some of them would be generous to this poor, blind, beggar. Not many were, but somehow I got by.

I remember when I was young, and that terrible day when my sight began to fade. My eyes began to itch, then clog, and it was like all the colour drained away, then... nothing. Darkness. I was left with the memory of light, but what use was that memory? I was cast out. I couldn't work, had to rely on the charity of others. It's a horrible thing to be in that situation. You are completely helpless, no self-respect, no hope, and you're left with the thought of what your life might have been if only you could still see.

I did hear though. The sound of sandals on the road. The stomp of soldiers. Every now and again the sound of a leather purse and jingle of small coins as someone took pity on me. And I heard the talk. For a while, they had been speaking of this man, this Jesus, that he could do amazing things. And then on that fateful day, I heard the crowd. They pushed past me, almost trod on me, most ignored me when I asked what was going on. But then someone told me – it was Jesus, and the crowd with him passing by.

I had that one moment. Now or never. "Jesus! Have mercy on me!" They tried to shut me up, but I kept shouting – and he heard me, one voice in the crowd, and came to me, and asked me what I wanted. And then, he made me see.

I take such joy in every scene. It's only when you've lost something that you really appreciate it – every day is full of wonder. I've been following where Jesus goes ever since. So I was there, with all his followers, as we praised God on our way into Jerusalem, taking in every single thing, and wondering what I will see next. I want to be there for every moment. I am full of joy, knowing this Jesus. He made me see.

Pray:

Almighty God, open our eyes again to see the beauty of the creation around us, to see the detail of the flower and the Butterfly. Jesus, you made me see; help me to now open the eyes of others around me, to see the suffering of those around us, to see the need and to respond. Holy Spirit, open our eyes, open our hearts and minds to see the way in which we should follow, setting Christ's life as an example before us. Amen.

Monday – Nicodemus: He gave me insight (John 3:1-21)

It's not easy when you have to admit that someone else knows more than you, especially when you're supposed to be one of those that teaches others. But there was something there that I just couldn't ignore.

We Pharisees are known for our learning, and our desire to follow the Law. After all, isn't that what matters? The Law that was given to us by God, that reconciles us with God? You start by learning – learning all the Torah, and then you learn by debating – and that's what we did. What does this passage mean? When there are references to the foreigners in our camps, should we apply those words to the Gentile Converts? We take our Scripture, our debates, our learning, seriously.

So I wasn't pleased at first when this new Rabbi, Jesus, appeared. Where had he been when we were debating the Law? Who had he learned from? How could he, someone who none of us had ever heard of before, be seen by the people as equal to us – never mind superior. But the stories couldn't be ignored. He spoke with a passion that inspired others. He did things no-one believed possible. There were whispers that he'd turned water into wine, that he'd miraculously healed people. Even so, his actions in the Temple when he drove out the money-lenders caused uproar. We Pharisees were not fans. And yet, there was something there that made me want to know more. So one night, I went to see him and engage him in debate.

It didn't go how I expected. Yes, he listened to me, but rather than debate, he challenged me – said things I didn't understand, talked about God loving the world enough to send his Son so that God's people may have eternal life. I went away with much to ponder; not least, when he talked about the Son of Man being lifted up to save others. I ponder that still. But some of it at least has started to make more sense to me. There being a Spiritual Birth as well as a physical one for example. It sounded strange at first, but the more I considered, the more it made sense: he'd talked about the Ruach, the breath of God, the Spirit, and as I experienced that deep awakening of the Spirit within me, I think I finally understood what he meant by being born again – I was changed, different from what I was before. He gave me insight, and it has changed me.

Pray:

Holy Spirit, come again and fill us, breathe anew in us the peace of your presence, challenge us and change us. Enable us to be the children of God that we are called to be. Amen

Tuesday – The Widow of Nain: He gave me back my hope
(Luke 7: 11-19)

I remember that day as if it were yesterday, but it has been several months now. The grief, the sheer sense of devastating loss were draining the life out of me, as life had drained from my son, my boy.

My Son, my only child. I have raised him by myself since his father died early in our marriage. It's not been easy raising the boy by myself, but there was always hope, always dreams of a future, a family for him, for grandchildren. Oh how the thought of grandchildren have cheered me in my declining years, but then all that was lost; the hope of a future – lost.

My son was dead, the dreams of a future were dead, thoughts of grandchildren dead. All the hope, joy and love sucked away by the grip of death and only grief entered my heart that once was full of hope and love.

It was time for the final goodbye, time to go outside the walls of the town, time to let the grief overflow and the mourners gather to weep with me. In those final moments, I just wanted it to all be over and done with, but the town was crowded. It was noisy and full of people, people chattering and excited, people stopping and looking, people getting in the way. Why can't they see my grief and loss? Why do they get to be happy on this the worst of days for me?

Trying to follow the funeral procession through the crowds to the gates, moving through the people was hard, there was lots of jostling and noise, my vision was blurred from my tears and there he was. One who I have heard about: you'd have to be deaf not to hear the stories about him. He's said to be from God, to be about to perform miracles. With such gentleness he reached for my hand,

such sorrow was in his eyes, as if he sensed my grief and loss, then the unexpected happened. He stepped forward and spoke words that I will never forget, words of hope, that I can't imagine. "Young Man, I say to you rise."

The bearers almost dropped the Bier in shock as my son, my dead, now alive son sat up and spoke to this man, Jesus. He helped my son down and brought him to me – My son- alive, hope has been restored to my heart, a future rewritten, life anew.

We travel together now, towards Jerusalem, to take sacrifices and to give thanks to Yahweh for the Passover feast. This year it means so much more, I have something special to give thanks for, to Yahweh for my son, hope is restored, for me, for my son, for all God's people.

I've heard from fellow travellers that he, Jesus is in Jerusalem. Will this be the year that God's people are freed from oppression and fear? Is this the year that hope is restored to our nation through this man, who is said to be the Messiah, the Son of God? I wonder if I might get a chance to see him, to say thank you and to be able to tell him what he has given me. A chance to tell him of the joy and hope he restored to me.

My Son is betrothed now; she's a nice girl from a neighbouring town. She's going to come and live with us once they are officially married. I can dream and hope again, for laughter to fill the home, for cries of young babies, for family meals to celebrate life anew.

He gave me back my hope that day.

Pray:

Lord God, we pray for all those in our world whose lives are consumed by despair. Bring them hope, and show us how we can

give that message of hope to all people throughout our world.
Amen.

Wednesday – The Leper: He made me whole (Luke 17: 11-19)

Travelling this same road again in different circumstances is very strange, almost unreal, because last time it was life changing. So, I travel towards Jerusalem today, not just a changed man, but one who is welcomed within communities again.

That specific day is one that I will never forget, because he changed everything: everything I had known for those years of desolation. I was an outcast, one according to the Law who could no longer live within the community, one who couldn't be touched by anyone otherwise they would be classed as unclean. I was one who was cast out of home, of family, of my community; I had no choice but to go and live with others like myself, the unclean ones in the outcast colonies.

That day started out bright and sunny. Me and my companions had sought shelter near a village, needing shade from the burning sun. We had heard about him; news travels within our outcast communities too. He was a healer, a man of God, one who is surrounded by mystery and also compassion, or so we had heard. We knew that the villagers wouldn't like us so close - they might catch something from us - but we needed shade and we wanted to see him, to ask him, if he could heal those like us; those like us who had followed the Law of Moses and still ended up unclean. The forgotten ones of society – who longed for home, for family, to be touched by a loved one without the fear of causing harm or the risk of passing on the disease. A disease of body that slowly sends the mind mad, because of the loneliness and lack of physical contact, a loving touch.

So, like mad men we'd waited in the shelter, waited for this man who might, this man who could possibly change our lives and give us back oh so much of what we had lost, wondering if he could possibly make us whole again as we longed to be.

He did perform miracles that day; he did give all ten of us life again in ways that we had missed for so long, but to me he gave more. On realising that I had been healed, my skin no longer sore and bleeding, my mind no longer muddled by loneliness and grief, I sought him out and thanked him. I didn't think that anyone could understand the pain that Leprosy caused until I looked in his eyes. He understood what it was to be alone, to be separated from those he loved; I felt he understood my longing for family. Love shone in his eyes. Love for me, I think, but who would love, who could love a healed Leper; this man could, the one who was seen as the Son of God.

He made me whole. He gave me back so much that day, so much that I'm travelling that same road where he stopped and stood and spoke to us; travelling to Jerusalem to give thanks to Yahweh, to celebrate Passover. This time as I travel, I'm not alone, but with family, my mother and father, my brothers and their wives. I've heard he's in Jerusalem too for the Passover, I wonder if he would remember me if I saw him.

My family, Oh such lovely words to be able to say, they don't understand the significance of this road, this place as I do, for it was here that he gave me back my life – he made me whole.

Pray:

Loving God, help us to pray for wholeness and not just healing; to remember that suffering is in mind and spirit as well as in body. Lord, as you healed the leper not just from his physical suffering,

but made him whole, help us to bring all our needs before you, and make us whole. Amen.

Maundy Thursday – Martha: He helped me understand

(Luke 10:38-42 & Matthew 26:17-29)

There was so much to do, so many preparations to make for the special feast; it was Passover after all! Why had they left it so long to ask Jesus about arrangements? Everything gets left to us women again, its as if they think we don't want to hear what Jesus has to say.

Something is changing; I've listened to him as I've worked long enough now to know that something is bothering him. There's a change in his voice: Longing? Worry? Concern? Coming to Jerusalem was a mistake: we should have stayed outside the city, at Bethany where he is amongst friends, and travelled in each day for the feast of Passover, but he says he needs to be here. Why will he not listen to his friends, to my brother and be careful? It's not safe here; I've seen the looks he gets as he passes by, the way that the temple guards look at us as we go to worship. Us women can only go so far as we cannot worship Yahweh with the others; men get to go further into the Temple – but we see enough to know.

He is the One, I know in my heart he is the One. He keeps talking about death and new life, I don't understand it all. I wish like Mary, I was content to stop and sit and listen, but there is so much to get done, so much to prepare – he keeps tells us that this will be his last meal with us, what if he is right?

They have him! They took him, he offered no defence, no resistance! Even when Peter pulled out the sword and cut some servants' ear off, he just stood there allowing it all to happen around him - he even healed the servant. It doesn't make sense, why would he who is the Son of God, allow people to take him? Why did he not fight? Where was Yahweh, the Father in all of this? Why did Yahweh not send angels to protect Him, to fight for him?

At the Passover meal earlier tonight, he said that the bread was his body, and the wine was his blood; he talked of the covenant, which bought forgiveness for all, that he gave his body and blood for us and for all. What did he mean? Was he meaning that he was going to be a sacrifice, like the Paschal Lamb? A sacrifice given for all, to save the people? Is this what he meant? A blameless person, an unblemished lamb, sacrificed to save the Israelites, like the lamb whose blood marked the lintels of the homes in Egypt providing protection from death?

Oh, Jesus what have you done? Was there no other way?

Finally, I understand what he meant when he said he was the Lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the World.

He helped me understand.

Pray:

Lord God, source of all wisdom, how often we struggle to know which way to go! How often we fail to understand! Send the Holy Spirit to guide us, to show us wisdom, and to encourage us to follow you, even when we are not sure where you are taking us. Amen.

Good Friday – Pilate: He spoke truth to me (John 18:28-40)

The crowd have gone now. Up to the hill. I have done my duty, and even if I had not, who would dare challenge me, the representative of the Emperor? So why do I feel this pang of guilt about him? Is it because I have heard the truth today, from one that I have condemned?

I know what they say. That we're brutes, that we care nothing for them. Well, there's a grain of truth in that. We Romans know how to rule over the unwilling, and you don't do that by being gentle. And they'll only ever say it quietly, because they know that we won't accept any sign of rebellion. We divide and rule, and we do it pretty well. Just look at what happened today.

I'd heard talk of this Jesus of course, some sort of prophet apparently. He was stirring things up they said, so we kept an eye. But he never did anything that threatened us – we stay out of their religious debates, and he showed no interest in rebellion – apparently at one point he even told them they should pay their taxes to us. Wise move. So it was a surprise when they brought him to me, bound, and told me he was a rebel and a criminal. Even more because it was one of their festivals. Hadn't they got better things to do? And when I asked what he had done, they didn't really answer – they were vague, just said they wouldn't have brought him to me if he wasn't deserving of it. I had to stifle a laugh at that one. I know a lie when I hear one – if only because when you're in my position, so few people will tell the truth if they don't think you want to hear it. But you don't get to become Governor without being sharp enough to tell the difference between truth and lies.

“Take him away, you've got your own courts haven't you?” I said. But of course, we don't allow them to put people to death, and

that's what they wanted. So I spoke to him, put the charges to him, and he didn't cower away; instead, he spoke truth to me. When I asked him if he was a King, he asked me where I'd heard that; then he talked about a kingdom, but not of the world – reassured me effectively that his followers were not about to fight. He said he'd come to tell the truth. And, really, I knew it. “What is truth,” I said to him with derision, but when I looked at him I could see it.

I did try to get him out of it, but the priests had riled the crowd up. Yes I could have sent the legion out there, but, well, it would get ugly, and so I did the most expedient thing. After all, what's one man's life really worth, especially one who's not a Roman Citizen? They took him away, with a couple of others, out to the hill. Normally I wouldn't have given him a second glance, but I watched them lead him away, the crowd following, and I was disturbed. One man, or the peace of the province? A no-brainer really. And yet, knowing I had the power, he spoke truth to me. Is that why I am so unquiet in my soul?

Pray:

Speak truth to us this day O Lord, helps us to listen and hear your word. Bring clarity to our hearts and minds as we travel through this week, recalling the actions taken that bought us life. Use us as pursuers of truth, may we speak your words of truth into situations that challenge and change the world around us.

Amen.

Holy Saturday – Barabbas: He gave his life for me (Luke 23:19-25)

Freedom! To breathe that fresh air again, even if it does hurt from the flogging. What? You don't think they'd let me go without inflicting some sort of punishment do you? After all, they did the same to that other guy, even when the Governor wanted to let him go. But the wounds will heal with time, and I'm free. Sort of. I know they'll be keeping an eye on me, so I've got to keep my nose clean from now on.

I really hate those Romans, but you have to hand it to them – they know what they're doing. I'd tried to carve out my own little territory, got some followers, got some weapons, but as soon as we started to cause them trouble they were down on us. I think one or two escaped, but most of us were killed – and worse, they captured me. They're cruel, and they wanted to make an example of me, make sure that no-one else would try and do what I had done. And it wasn't going to be quick – this would be hours, maybe even days, of suffering and humiliation before the end.

But then, I had a stroke of luck. I hadn't been the only one stirring things up, and the Priests brought this other guy to the Governor. Jesus, his name was. And it so happened that one of the priests was a friend of my cousin, so when old Pilate went out and asked them who they wanted to set free for Passover, he got the crowd to shout for me. I wonder how much he had to pay them – I'm not daft, there's not many around who like me. But it worked. I could hardly believe it – all that Jesus had done was annoy the fat cats in the Temple, and say some things they didn't like from what I heard.

I saw him you know. Just for a moment. After our respective beatings, as two guards were taking me from my cell to throw me

out of the palace, two more were taking him out for the final march up to the hill. There was a glance, a look, that was all. But it shook me. If he'd have looked at me with anger, I'd have got it; if he'd been so consumed with fear that he barely noticed me – well, I was moments away from that myself. But in that moment, there was no anger or fear or even pain in his eyes; instead, it felt like he was sorry for me. Me, the Bandit King, even as I was being freed in his place.

He's dead of course. They went up last night, because of it being Passover and not wanting to leave them up there, and he was already dead. Someone even claimed his body they tell me. I doubt anyone would have claimed mine. I don't know how I feel about it all. I should be glad, because it wasn't me; at the same time, I can't pretend that he deserved it and I didn't. He gave his life for me. And he didn't blame me, didn't curse me, or even the Romans, or the Priests who had got him into that situation. I know he's dead and gone, but I want to go and talk to someone that knew him. Maybe I should. After all, he gave his life for me.

Pray:

Almighty God, as we wait in this time of quiet, waiting but knowing the outcome of the 'his story', may we be thankful for the life we have been given, thankful for the promise of new life, thankful for the life given in place of mine. Most Holy God, we come with thanksgiving for the blood that has been shed, the Lamb sacrificed for all, for me. Thank you.

Easter Sunday - Mary Magdalene: He called me by name (John 20: 1-18)

There's a battle of fear in the darkness; he's gone and the light has gone with him. He gave me so much hope, so much life; he helped me to live again and now life is gone, because he is gone. Its like walking around in dense fog, you can't see clearly where you are going - just a hazy space in front of you, a dark hazy space.

He gave me purpose: he helped me to see who I was, not the shell of who I had become. He saw the real me and helped restore me to be who I am. But what am I without him? Where do I go now, where do I belong? For the past year or two I have followed and been part of something special, part of something bigger than myself, part of the Kingdom of Heaven that he always talked about – but what now?

I've come alone in the dark. It enfolds me like a garment: whilst there is fear there is also comfort in the darkness. It's quiet and no one can see me; I can be alone with my thoughts, alone to think about the future and where I go next, what I do next. Will the disciples and the women still want me? Will I still be part of them? I've got so used to having people around me, people that genuinely seem to care for me, will they still care now that he has gone? They are scared and hiding at the moment, like me they are upset and uncertain about the future and what it holds.

Alone in the dark, I can think about what needs to be done, to see if the stone can be moved from the tomb entrance, or if there are guards, like we heard there were. What did they think we would do, come and steal Jesus' body in the night?

The stone's gone, its empty! Who would do this? Why would they do this? Peter, I must tell Peter, James, John, the others – who could have done this? Isn't our misery enough?

They came, they came back with me, running as fast as they could, in disbelief, in fear, in hope!

Where, oh where is he? Even in death we couldn't honour him. The others have gone back to tell the women, and his other followers; I just want to stay for a bit and be alone. Since I knew him, that feeling of aloneness had eased: I was known by him. Now he has gone, and that aloneness is creeping back.

I've wandered too far, I'm not even sure if I'm still in the right garden. Jesus, if only...!

Excuse me, have you seen people moving a body from the tomb over there? Do you know where my friend's body is? Please, if you know anything tell me!

He called me by name, he knows me!

The fear and darkness which embraced me like a cloak are gone, there is something bursting up inside of me, hope is dawning on this day as never before – Can it be?

He is here, however this is possible, he is here, he is alive.

He called me by name, he knows me!

Pray:

Risen Lord Jesus, as we celebrate your victory over death we marvel that you know us – every single one of us – and call us by name. Keep us secure in your unfailing love, and help us rejoice this Easter. Amen.