

## SO WHAT DO YOU SEE?

### *A Sermon for Mornington Methodist Church*

Daffodils. Let's start with daffodils. On 15 April 1804, William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy took a walk along the shore of Lake Ullswater in the Lake District. When they got home again, Dorothy wrote down in her journal what they had seen:

When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side. But as we went along there were more and yet more, and at last under the boughs of the trees we saw there was a long belt of them along the shore. I have never seen daffodils so beautiful. They grew up among the mossy stones all about them. Some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow, for weariness, but the others tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake. They looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing.

Her brother later wrote not a description, but a poem.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the Milky Way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

You'll notice that memory was already playing its usual tricks. Dorothy has vanished from the scene, as have all the drooping flowers. But the poem makes an important distinction between what was seen by the physical eye of the beholder and 'that inward

eye which is the bliss of solitude'. It's the difference between the physical capacity for sight and the in-our-head visioning, which is a function of our imagination and memory. Such a distinction runs all through this service. 'Look at the wonder of the universe', says the star-gazing dad in the children's story, but the little boy is too busy seeing a snail creeping over a stone.

Writing about 60 years after the death of Jesus, the writer we know as Mark recorded a memory of a rather different but equally remarkable event, in Jesus' life.

As Jesus is leaving the city of Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem, 'with his disciples and a large crowd', they come across 'a blind beggar named Bartimaeus,' sitting by the road. That's where the destitute waited in biblical times: near a major traffic point, as they still do in modern cities.

'When he heard it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, 'Jesus! Son of David, take pity on me!' Many of the people scolded him and told him to be quiet', says Mark, 'but he shouted even more loudly, 'Son of David, take pity on me!''

Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' So they called the blind man. 'Cheer up,' they said. 'Get up, he is calling you.' He threw off his cloak, jumped up, and came to Jesus. 'What do you want me to do for you?' Jesus asked him. 'Teacher,' the blind man answered. 'I want to see again.' 'Go,' Jesus told him, your faith has made you well.' At once he was able to see, and followed Jesus on the road.

We don't have a Dorothy Wordsworth to ground this story in fact, but Matthew evidently accepted it as truthful because he repeats it in his gospel....though now it is about *two* blind men, met as Jesus *leaves* Jericho, not as he approaches it. (That's how stories change in the telling.) John's gospel features a much more elaborate version of Jesus' healing of a blind beggar (John 9-10). As arguments rage over what really happened and who this healer can be, the man simply insists, 'I do not know if he is a sinner or not. One thing I do know: I was blind and now I see!' (Which is the phrase John Newton picked up and used in his famous Amazing Grace hymn.)

### **Let's spend a moment or so interrogating our text.**

*Do you have any relatives?* Yes. There are plenty of other biblical texts that refer to blindness, from the deception of old blind Jacob by his son Esau to the denunciation of the wealthy church in Laodicea (Revelation 3): "You say that you are rich and wealthy and need nothing, but fail to see that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, needing a salve for your eyes to see what you truly are!' But they all make it clear that Jesus lived in what is to us a barbaric eye-for-an-eye culture, in which blindness was generally understood to be a disabling punishment inflicted by God on sinning humans—or in turn by humans on other human beings.

Jesus himself had to deal with Pharisees who brought a blind man to him and asked 'who has sinned, this man or his parents'? Samson was blinded by his Philistine enemies; so was the last King of Jerusalem by the conquering Babylonians. Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus and later miraculously healed as a sign of his spiritual renewal. But Paul himself (Acts 13) inflicted blindness on a Jewish opponent. And I regret to say that such horrific behaviour based on religiously-sanctioned laws

and primitive theologies has persisted down into our time. In 1154, the Christian ruler of Byzantium, after defeating a pagan army from Bulgaria, had 15,000 prisoners blinded and sent back home. In the first World War mustard gas attacks blinded hundreds; as recently as 2009, under Shariah Law, an Iranian criminal was blinded after he had blinded someone else. It is small wonder that Jesus' *saving* of others' sight made such a stir! This was indeed Good News!

*Why do you think your story is set down here, just here?*

Just before this passage, the disciples are arguing about who is to be greatest in Heaven—without having a clue about what is really about to happen to Jesus when he does reach Jerusalem. I think Luke means to contrast their blind dreaming about messiahship and the privileges it will bring them, with Jesus' characteristic sharpness of insight as he confronts actual poverty and disability. What do you really want, he asks the blind man—and he gets an honest answer, remote from discussions of heavenly thrones or even Jesus as the Messiah on his triumphant way to Zion.

*Unusually, this blind man has got a name. Can that tell us anything about him?* The name Bartimaeus just means the son of Timaeus. What's interesting is that this isn't a Jewish but a Greek name. This beggar isn't a Jew abandoned by his society, but a failed gentile: again, on the verge of his own death, Jesus reaches out across the barriers. To put it another way, Jesus isn't star-gazing: he is looking at the poor creature at his feet. He ignores ethnicity: he focuses on the beggar's desperate need.

*Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, naming him Son of David. Why does he do that?* The phrase had become associated with the long dreamt-of Messiah, who would liberate Israel from the Romans and bring back the glory days of David's rule. The gospel writers are at pains to introduce the title whenever they can—indeed, both the elaborate genealogies created for Jesus in Matthew and Luke's gospels trace his bloodline back to King David.

Now the Messiah was to be God's own emissary, and since in those early times it was thought that only God could refuse or restore sight—Psalm 146: 'The Lord sets prisoners free and gives sight to the blind. He lifts those who have fallen, he loves his righteous people' (words that have echoed down the centuries in prayers and hymns)—Jesus' healing of the blind would have been read as a clear sign that he was indeed the promised Messiah, and the beggar's cry a signal that he had recognised the true nature of the man walking past him at the Jericho gate. In other words, the beggar had the 'inner eye' of faith.

*What about the end of the story?* The ending of a story is often more interesting than its beginning and that is true of this one. Bartimaeus is told to 'go'. He doesn't go home, he doesn't rush away to tell everyone he knows, he turns and follows Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Presumably that was meant as an encouragement to early Christians reading this gospel. But I have to confess that as a latter-day Christian I am left wondering what Bartimaeus made of what he could now see with his own two eyes. Yes, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem...but after that? And what of his crippling poverty?

But I don't want to finish in speculation. Time to ask, what to make of this event in our

time. The miraculous element in the Jesus healing story loses much of its power in the face of what we now know about causes and remedies. The World Health Organisation tells us that due to the effects of aging, eye disease and accident there are currently 200 million people blind, or with very little vision. Of this global burden of blindness, 90% is born by developing countries, and 80% is preventable or treatable just by applying existing knowledge and technology.

**What may be more important for us is the immediate compassion for the destitute and the disabled, and the active intervention to heal, demonstrated by Jesus in this story. That is a universal model for behaviour in any culture and in any age.**

**Further, the distinction between outward sight and inner vision is crucial to our understanding of ourselves and of the world we observe. In the face of apparent moral chaos, self-serving greed, immense cruelty and indifference to suffering and the despair that induces, there is still a desperate need for the inner eye of faith, hope and love of the Jesus kind, leading to active compassion and personal involvement in change. We may not be able to heal blind Bartimaeus, but every one of us can do something to bring about a better world for such as he than a beggar's dusty squatting place at the gates of wealthy Jericho.**

So, what do I see in myself and in the world about me? may be the best question left by what I have said.

**AMEN**