

## Faith to Follow

My thoughts this week have been on the upcoming Annual Congregational reports on past and planned activities and also the celebration on 31<sup>st</sup> October of Reformation Day. We are thinking of the call for renewal of the Church local and universal, and faith to follow Jesus.

We ask ourselves what are the features of resurrection from the death of the past that we can describe? We can learn something from *Job 42:5* and the story in *Mark 10:46-52* of Son of Timaeus, and some helpful discussion of the role of the Church as Social Pioneer.

"I heard about you from others; now I have seen you with my own eyes," says *Job (42:5)*. These are words that could also have been said by blind "Son of Timaeus," whose name has also come down to us. Others who were healed have not been named. Changes in personal insight can lead to change in allegiance and to the road of life followed. A resurrection occurred in both Job and Son of Timaeus.

Bartimaeus' name has come down to us because healing was not the end of the story. He decided to follow Jesus down the road. He followed "the way of Jesus." Later, he may have been pointed out to early Christians as "one of Jesus' disciples, who stayed the distance, the cross and resurrection."

Unlike the 12 disciples closest to Jesus who didn't see what Jesus really intended or understand his teaching, he is recorded as one who had his sight clearly on Jesus and his mission.

What happened to the others who were healed in Mark's gospel account of numerous healing? To mention a few: "man with an unclean spirit, Simon's fevered mother-in-law, leper in Galilee, roof-damaging friends of paralytic, man with withered hand, Gerasene demoniac," and so on.

There is no record of them following Jesus. They were healed and went on with their lives without a backward glance, or word of thanks. "What do you want me to do for you," asks Jesus. "I want to be healed," is the response. Jesus says "You are healed because of your faith." And right away the healing took place. People got on with their lives.

But Bartimaeus was different. He heard the Word, saw God's judgement, and had a vision of resurrected life. God speaks the healing Word, judges that healing should not be just for one, but for all, and provides a vision of a resurrected world-wide community. So Bartimaeus became a pioneer, as we read: "He went down the road with Jesus." He had faith to follow.

The 12 disciples were also "on the road with Jesus." "He also wanted to send them out to preach and force out demons," (Mark 3:14-15). Later, they were sent out two by two "with power over evil spirits" (Mark 6:7) and "started telling everyone to turn to God. They forced out many demons and healed a lot of sick people by putting olive oil on them" (Mark 6:12-13). Pioneering work.

But in spite of their ministry and the positive responses they got they are not recorded as having the gift of perception that Bartimaeus had. We read (Mark 10:32) "They were confused as Jesus led them toward Jerusalem and his other followers were afraid."

Jesus did some plain-talking about facing death after being handed "over to foreigners" after trial by "chief priests and teachers of the Law of Moses." The disciples respond by wanting Jesus to do them a favour, namely grant them positions of power in the coming kingdom, (Mark 10:33, 35-36). They did not yet have a vision of resurrection.

"What do you want me to do for you?" is the question Jesus puts to those who come to him. The church picks up on this approach when it goes out into a community and asks "What do you want the church to do for you? What are your needs? The call of Jesus is to be ready to be helpful, in providing a healing ministry, as well as a ministry of delivering the Word.

So the church asks people “What are you looking for, what needs do you have?” Then the church works out which needs can be met and which ones have highest priority. What do we have to do to provide healing for a sick and suffering society? It has to marshal the people and the resources and the strategies and tactics to implement responsible action.

In his paper on the “*Responsibility of the Church for Society*” H. Richard Niebuhr addresses this “important and difficult question,” of responsible action for which he notes that “Neither Jesus nor his disciples found an easy answer.”

After careful consideration of the scope of Christian responsibility, to the universal (God) and to the particular (Christ) Niebuhr speaks of the need to describe the social responsibility of the Church as that of “Pioneer.” “It is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole.”

“It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees (God's) judgements, which has the vision of the resurrection...it is the pioneer part...to lead all nations to (God)...to understand the vanity of idol-worship, and in obeying the law of love (of neighbour.)”

“In ethics it is the first to repent for the sins of society...(for example, “When it becomes apparent that slavery is transgression of the divine commandment, then the Church repents of it, turns its back upon it, abolishes it within itself.”)

Similarly with regard to property, nationalism, racialism and economic imperialism. “As the representative and pioneer of (humankind) the Church meets its social responsibility when in its own thinking, organisation and action it functions as a world society, undivided by race, class and national interests.”

The final sentence in Niebuhr's paper is: “In pioneering and representative action of response to God in Christ the invisible Church becomes visible and the deed of Christ is reduplicated.”

Niebuhr noted in his introductory remarks on the “Urgency of the Question.” (There is) “a peculiar urgency for the modern church which is confronted with unusual evidences of misery in the life of human communities and of weakness within itself.”

“Christians live today in and with nations that are either dying or over which the threat of doom hangs like a heavy cloud. Some of them are miserable in abject physical poverty, some seem hopelessly divided within themselves; some are powerful and affluent beyond the imagination of past years but full of internal anxieties and badgered by fears.”

“In a general atmosphere of spiritual confusion political decisions are made uncertainly and hesitatingly. Apprehension of disaster has taken the place of the hope of progress as the dominant mood and motive of action.”

The challenges facing our world and our locality are known to us. Like Job, we see with our own eyes the reality we are given. Like Bartimaeus, we are called to follow Jesus “down the road.” Jesus shows us the way of being the one who offers life and energy for the renewal of that part of society in which we are located. We ask Jesus, not “What can you do for us?”, but “What do you want from us?” His answer is: “Follow me, as Bartimaeus did, “down the road to cross and resurrection.”

Today, let us pray for Reformation for our congregation and the universal Church:

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church.

Fill us with all truth and peace; where there is corruption, purify us;

where there is error, direct us; where things are amiss, reform us;

where we are right, strengthen us; where we are in need, provide for us;

where we are divided, reunite us; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.