

REFLECTION Don't let your sight get in the way of your vision!

This is Mark's story about a blind man called Bartimeus. I guess this resonates with me because, as an artist, my sight has always been incredibly important to me.

A couple of years ago I was introduced to a book about another blind man. The book is "Thunder Dog" by Michael Hingson.

This is a man, blind since birth, whose parents determined that they would give him the most "normal" upbringing they could. He was treated no differently to his sighted brother. He learned to navigate his way around the neighbourhood on his own. He comments that contrary to popular misconception, blind people do not magically obtain heightened other senses. They have to develop better hearing through practice, just like anyone else. Soon after that he began riding his bike and alarming the neighbours. Michael says he mastered the art of bike riding via echolocation – he somehow sensed when something was in his way.

He knew he was different from the other kids but he decided not to let it stop him. He was the only blind kid in his school and for several years had no braille teacher. There were many things he could not participate in - like drawing or other visual projects and he needed someone to read his assignments to him. To compensate, his parents worked with him at home and he remarks he learned much more from his parents than he learned at school in those first few years. Finally, around fourth grade, the school district hired a Braille teacher and at last he could read for himself. He went on to attend the University of California, graduating with honours and a Master's degree in physics as well as earning his teaching credentials.

Michael received his first guide dog at age 14 and has had a succession of guide dogs throughout his life, a number of which remained with him as pets when their working life was over.

Which brings us to the catalyst for this book.

On September 11, 2001 Michael was working in his office on the 78th floor of the North Tower in the World Trade Centre where he worked for a company that provided data protection and network storage systems. At 8.46am he heard a tremendous boom and the building shuddered violently. We all know what happened that day! Over the hours that followed, Michael and his guide dog Roselle, together with

thousands of office workers, slowly made their way down 78 floors in the pitch-black of the stairwell.

The book is the story of that escape, but it is also a testament to his life. Following that terrible day and that life-changing experience, Michael started speaking publicly about being blind and what it can mean. It became his mission to teach his listeners new ways of looking at life and their world.

He is fond of saying that "Being blind is not a problem." The problem is being blind in a world made for sighted people.

For example, most windows in modern buildings are not there for ventilation (and I speak as someone who built a house with big windows). As he says, the windows are there so the sighted can look out of them!

Now we don't have too many blind people in our congregation.

But to try and explain it in a way we understand, Michael uses an analogy which likens being blind to being left-handed. Now I am myself left-handed, and I do know that there are a lot of left-handed people in our congregation.

More than the 10% we are often quoted.

You may recall that even in our life-time, when children started school, they were made to change to writing with their right hand. There is no inherent problem with being left-handed. The problems arise from the fact that society is structured for the right-handed.

The story this morning from Luke is about another blind man. Who lived in a time when the only thing blind people could do was sit by the side of the road and beg.

The story begins with a statement, 'They came to Jericho'. Jericho is about 25kms northeast of Jerusalem. Jesus and his followers have travelled from the Sea of Galilee in the north of the country, walking south along the banks of the River Jordan, following the fault line of the Rift Valley to Jericho, which has the lowest elevation of any city on earth - about 750 feet below sea level. They were on the pilgrims' way to Jerusalem, literally going UP to Jerusalem. This was Jesus' final journey. Jericho was an important place because conquering the city of Jericho allowed the Israelites to cross into the Promised Land. You may remember the Old Testament story when the trumpets sounded and the walls of the city fell down! That was Jericho. Now contrast that great victorious memory with Bartimaeus and his lowly position - a blind beggar, sitting in the dust by the side of the road.

Bartimaeus, the blind man, is sidelined – literally on the side of the road. On the other hand, it was also the only place to be for beggars, strategically located outside the city gate to appeal for help to passers-by. These people were the nobodies of society.

Most healing miracles recorded in the gospels only refer to unnamed persons. But here, Mark names the blind beggar –

Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus - not only his name but his heritage. The irony is even further increased by the beggar's name. *Bartimaeus* means "son of honour." Mark makes the irony immediately present by spelling out that Bartimaeus is "the son of Timaeus" and, just in case you might miss it, "a blind beggar." Mark translates Bartimaeus into its parts: "the son of Timaeus," which everyone in Mark's audience would have known means *honour*. The contrast between his name, "son of honour," and being a blind beggar, the supreme experience of shame in Jericho, is made crystal clear by all of this attention to his name. Because he was sitting in the dust "by the side of the road."

When he hears it is Jesus of Nazareth, Bartimaeus calls out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." Every other time someone acclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, he told them to go quietly away and tell no-one. This time, however, Jesus does not silence Bartimaeus because he is on his way to Jerusalem and is about to enter that city as the Messiah. Fast forward to Palm Sunday - although most of the people who acclaimed Jesus' entry into Jerusalem deserted him less than a week later. Bartimaeus may have been blind, but he saw in Jesus, someone who could heal him. What did this blind man see in Jesus that so many of those around him did not? And what is the implication for us?

Some cannot see. Others choose not to see. Jesus preached about this all the time – remember the parable of the seeds, for example. And the admonishment that

there are none so blind as those who do not wish to see.

The people for whom this gospel was written – Jesus followers - would have faced similar questions. What can we see in Jesus that others cannot? Why don't others see what is so obvious?

Just like the disciples when people brought their children to Jesus, those who were with Jesus rebuke Bartimaeus and tell him to be quiet. But Bartimaeus

cries out all the louder. He knows Jesus can heal him! And then Jesus stops and says, "Call him". And they do. The people who have been busy trying to hush the shouting beggar now pose as those who control access to Jesus. Bartimaeus doesn't need a second invitation. He throws off his coat and jumps up. Jesus knows perfectly well what Bartimaeus wants, but nevertheless he makes him spell it out.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

This is the big question Jesus asks of us as well.

This is the question Jesus asked James and John when they told him they wanted to sit at his right hand in glory. James and John wanted glory and power. Bartimaeus simply wants to see!

Jesus doesn't respond by touching him. He doesn't actually 'do' anything. He simply tells him to go, that his faith has made him well.

This is not just a healing story, it is also a "calling" story, because Bartimaeus immediately follows Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately, his death.

The story of blind Bartimaeus is the last healing miracle recorded in Mark's gospel. Although the healing of Bartimaeus reveals something of Jesus as the Messiah, the story focuses on the response of Bartimaeus himself. He tenaciously cries out for mercy and ends up following Jesus.

The persistent faith of the blind man is the focus of the story,

There are a number of people involved in this story

- the blind man calling for his sight to be restored
- the disciples who surround Jesus and try to keep others away
- the sceptical crowd that tries to control the blind man and then when they see Jesus does want to talk to the blind man, tries to act as if they control access to him
- Jesus who hears the cry of Bartimaeus and who answers his cry, heals his blindness and calls him to follow

Do you see yourself in this story as anyone of those people?

Imagine that Jesus is saying to you "What do you want me to do for you?" If we allow Jesus to open our eyes fully, what change might that require of us?

Or as Michael Hingson would say, "Don't let your sight get in the way of your vision!"