

**What If...!**  
**30<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year B**  
**25 October 2009**

Those of us who knew David Moxon at College House remember him as an open, approachable sort of a person, with a gift for friendship, and a warm interest in people. Just returned from a tour of duty with VSA in Fiji as it became independent, it was evident that he had a lot of social and intimacy skills. But he was unsure about the Christian faith. He had affection for the Anglican Church; his parents were committed church people, yet I can remember standing beside him on Whitewash head and hearing him say, "This is a dangerous view for an agnostic to be looking at."

Indeed, just a few years later he became a convinced Christian, helped in this decision by the university chaplain at Massey, where he had gone to do his Masters. And soon he was training for the church's ministry. I remember with pleasure travelling down from Mirfield to stay with him at St Peter's Oxford, where Paul Reeves had sent him to cram in a theology degree in two years. Since then David's career path has been meteoric in its rise – briefly Vicar of Gate Pa, director of the theological education by extension unit, Bishop of Waikato, then Archbishop of tikanga Pakeha. I must cheerfully admit to the feeling of having been lapped by him several times.

It is a curious thing that some of us plod on for years only slowly mastering the basics of Christianity, taking half a lifetime to get through Christianity 101, while others "get it" right away, and go from strength to strength on Zion's highway. Don't get me wrong – I am not saying that

Christianity is a competitive event. But a large part of David's leadership charisma stems from the reality that when people meet him they are aware of being in the presence of someone in whom the Christian faith is very much alive. Whereas yours truly, as I was telling you on back to church Sunday, is brought up with a round turn from time to time with the haunting question, "Was I ever really a Christian?"

We needn't be surprised at this contrast between slow learners and rapid adaptors because it is there in the pages of the New Testament right from the start of the Jesus movement. These last few Sundays we have been listening in to the intensive, in house teaching programme that Jesus has been conducting with his closest followers. He has repeatedly presented his startling teaching that life in the Kingdom will require his followers to live out the values of service and cross bearing in the day by day life agendas of their affections and possessions. Dominating behaviour and status seeking are not acceptable in the leadership cadre.

But the message hasn't got through. They have failed to grasp what he is on about. It is not so much a failure of intellectual understanding, as an inability to grasp a way of life in which they must grow beyond their present hardness of heart, limited horizons, and stunted sensibilities. Now they are at Jericho, just a day's walk from Jerusalem, about to embark on the most decisive phase of their public ministry. Yet, concern of concerns, about all you could say of these immediate followers is that they are physically following Jesus, because they certainly aren't on board with his programme.

At just this moment a puzzling incident takes place. It is the last healing miracle that Jesus will perform. But what is of more interest is the attitude of blind Bartimaeus. It is not just his boldness in insisting on attention, and in breaking through the cordon of discouragement. It is rather the fact of his instant recognition of the significance of Jesus without ever having met him. "Son of David," is a title Jesus is prepared to own up to – it is about as accurate a theological description as one of his Jewish contemporaries is likely to offer. And in the one shot question on which all depends he makes a request that has a double significance. He wants to see the physical world again, and he wants to see Jesus clearly for his full significance. And unlike many other recipients of a healing miracle he doesn't just slope off, with barely a word of thanks. This man follows on the way to Jerusalem with the small band that have gone looking for trouble, and of course, he is now a follower of "the way," the first description of Christianity. What is more the fact that his name details are so correct, including his Father's name, implies that the Christian community came to know him well as a foundation member. To sum it all up this is someone who "gets it" right away – what Jesus is on about, what this sacrificial way of life involves, who has inspired it – and it hasn't even required the thorough and unsuccessful education programme that the disciples were put through.

Which raises a fascinating "what if" might have been agenda for this last part of the gospel story that is about to begin. In the first part of his Galilean ministry Jesus, in his preaching about the Kingdom, puts forward God's full and final offer. By words and signs he proposes a fresh start for an unhappy world. Although greeted at first with interest and

enthusiasm, this proposal has been rejected mid way through Mark's gospel. Then Jesus, in faithful obedience to his heavenly Father, changes tack and set out a change of strategy that through cross and resurrection will radicalise the Kingdom agenda. Rejection and betrayal is now built in to the plot lines of what it takes to set the human race free.

But supposing that faithlessness and desertion are not the by line in the way the story will develop in Jerusalem. Just suppose that Bartimaeus, who got it in one, had set an infectious example that filled the disciples with inner resolve and intestinal fortitude. Suppose further that as a result of this Judas declined to provide the religious authorities with the intelligence information that made it so easy to arrest Jesus. Suppose then that the disciples had stood their ground, and had stuck by Jesus through thick and thin in all the events of Holy Week, refusing to back away from any attempt to seize Jesus by force. Suppose finally that the fickle crowds, who gave Jesus at first a ticker tape parade, had remained interested in what he had to say, and had indicated their clear displeasure at any attempt to silence him, or to get rid of him. Taken together these acts of solidarity would have made it very difficult for the ruling powers to inflict judicial murder on Jesus. What has come to be called the passion story might have had a very different outcome.

In a sense we are in a similar position to the disciples as they leave Jericho. As we walk out of Church this morning there is a question mark about the style and content of the way we will live our Christian identity. It is a choice between the bold adventurousness and rapid adaptation of Bartimaeus, and the timid, slow learning of the

disciples in which it requires shipwreck and disaster to act as a powerful educational instrument.

We are surrounded by a climate of indifference and often-outright unbelief to the faith claims of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are powerful underground influences that have been working their way through our culture and society for a long time that make this so. But if all this got started long before we were born there is at least one important area where what we say and do has an effect on the outcome of the faith development of other people's lives, that changes the story about what happens in the hearts and minds of our contemporaries.

People in whom the faith has taken deep root, they who have become deeply convinced Christians; tend to have a catalysing effect on other people's faith development. Whereas those who aren't sure, who diffidently keep the good news to themselves for fear of being misunderstood or ridiculed, have far fewer opportunities to winsomely persuade those they come into contact with. In that connection I recall the last French nuclear tests in the Pacific not that long ago, when a New Zealand frigate hovered around the edge of the test area. David Moxon was on board as the in house spiritual leader, and it is recalled that just about all the crew turned out for the Services he took. The members of our armed forces are not renowned for their Godliness and regular church going.

Bartimaeus then is an inspiring faith model for us. It is often the way that those who have just become Christians have a freshness and enthusiasm about their faith that acts as an encouragement and a source of refreshment for all of us. If we can live like

him we might change the way story ends for not a few of the people we know.