
Time to Shed the Cloak

Mark 10.46-52

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 25, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Some years ago, back in the days when I was a real pastor, I got a surprise visit from a man I hardly knew. He was the chief executive of a prominent corporation in the city in which I lived. He was one of those people that, however wealthy or senior he was, could never succeed in looking smart. Somehow the hair or the shoes or the beard always looked a bit out of control. I'd only met him once before, and even then we'd only spoken for a few minutes. He sat in the corner of my study, chewing his finger nails and holding rather nervously a home-made cassette. (For those who don't know, audiocassettes were things we used for recording music in days gone by, after the era of long-playing records and before the time of compact discs, which themselves were back in the days before we gave up listening to music because the skill required to master the technology was greater than the pleasure gained by hearing the song).

I hazarded a guess that small talk wasn't what my visitor had come for. He broke the ice. "I've come to see you because there's no one else I can tell. I want to be a Christian. In my world that's like saying I'm crazy (I expect you know that). Last night I got up in the early hours and made this tape and it says what I want to say and I want to leave it with you because there's no one else I can give it to." I think he became a Christian the moment he gave me that tape. Sometimes it's as simple as that. Of course there were probably years of wrestling and who knows how many sleepless nights spent pacing around at home. But in the end, he just drove to find the only pastor he knew, handed over the tape, and that was that.

Looking back, I think that moment all those years ago was the closest I've come to meeting Bartimaeus. Short as his story is, Bartimaeus is one of the most significant characters in the gospels. Mark's gospel is divided into two halves. The first half is set in Galilee. Jesus heals people and calls disciples, and in between times he teaches, often in parables, and gets into trouble with the authorities. In the second half the scene shifts to Jerusalem. There Jesus faces controversy, his identity's disclosed, and he's led to crucifixion. The story of Bartimaeus is the climax of the first half of the story.

To understand it, you need to go back to the Parable of the Sower in Mark chapter 4. You'll remember that Jesus talks there about four kinds of earth: the path, the rocky ground, the thistles, and the good soil. The first half of Mark's gospel illustrates these four kinds of discipleship. Some seed falls on the path: this refers to the authorities that reject Jesus outright, (the scribes and the Pharisees). Some seed falls on the stony ground: this refers to the disciples, especially Peter, James and John, (who accept the word immediately but wither in the face of temptation or persecution). Some seed falls among thorns: these include King Herod, (who takes to Jesus but as mired in a network of unsavoury commitments), and the rich young man (who Jesus calls but who just can't leave his money behind). And then there's the good soil. This refers to those who hear and accept the word and bear fruit in abundance. There aren't a lot of these in Mark's gospel. But Bartimaeus is certainly one of them. Mark's gospel tells a story in which those who are the professional holy people, those who have most exposure to Jesus and his teaching, and those who have the most money and status, all fall away and are all supplanted by this solitary blind beggar, who alone does exactly what Jesus wants – he "follows him on the way." Thus as the final verse in the first half of Mark's gospel puts it, the first become last, and the last, the blind beggar Bartimaeus, becomes first.

The heart of the story of Bartimaeus lies in his cloak. The cloak is the one thing he has. It's his source of protection, from dust and wind and rain and cold. And it's his source of income, like a street musician's open guitar case. This is the crisis of the story: Bartimaeus *has* one thing and he *wants* one thing. He *has* a cloak and he *wants* to see. How much does he want to see? Enough to part with his cloak? Absolutely. He parts with the one thing he has in order to receive the one thing that really matters. And Jesus stands still, as if to emphasize the timelessness of this moment, and asks Bartimaeus the penetrating question, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus has no hesitation. He knows *exactly* what to say.

The rest of the first half of Mark gives us plenty of examples of people who, unlike Bartimaeus, can't bring themselves to shed their cloak. People like us. This story confronts us with two overwhelming questions: Are we prepared to shed our cloak? And, When we come face to face with Jesus, do we know what to say?

How fervently we organize our lives in order never to be in Bartimaeus' position! Isn't this what our accumulation of wealth and possessions is all about? Wealth and possessions are the best and most resilient kind of cloak we know. They protect us from the vulnerability of facing personal, medical, career or social disaster. The trouble is, the more we possess, the more our possessions possess us. Managing money, managing property, managing our public image is time-consuming to the point of becoming overwhelming. We become like a Michelin man surrounded by layers of insulation, and the idea of springing to our feet and following Jesus seems impossible. And when Jesus says, "What do you want me to do for you?", our first instinct is almost bound to be a request to firm up the insulation. "Errr... be handy if you could raise house prices again please."

But wealth and possessions are by no means the only cloak on the rail. As we see in James and John, status is just as compelling. What is status really, and why do we crave it? Status is a way of trying to assure ourselves we have everyone's admiration so we can convince ourselves we don't need their love. That's what the chief executive who paid me the surprise visit was struggling with. He was coming to terms with the reality that he was going to lose people's admiration and was going to need their love in a way he'd never had to ask for it before. It was a bit like being a Duke student and imagining life without a 4.0. If we won't allow ourselves to shed the cloak of status, and Jesus asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?", what will we say? Something like, "Make everyone admire me or envy me or at least fear me, but never put me in a position where I need them to love me."

A university has its own kind of cloak. It's a cloak of knowledge. Doesn't matter whether it's philosophy, medicine, theology or aeronautical engineering, when we've read all the primary literature, and all the secondary literature, and every single scholarly article on a subject, we've built up a pretty impressive cloak. We know all there is to know. We can think of a thousand reasons not to leap to our feet and a hundred ways to deconstruct Jesus' call. But where does that get us in facing Jesus' question, "What do you want me to do for you?" The answer isn't in a book. What are we going to say? "Make me a bigger library?"

And before we get too pious and get into thinking cloaks are some kind of worldly thing, let's not forget there's plenty of religious cloaks too. Maybe we've had a profound religious experience or two. Maybe we're so determined to focus on the significance of our own experience that it becomes our cloak, the thing we can't part with when Jesus calls us. Maybe we're anxious that other Christians seem to be a bit fuzzy on matters of scripture or ethics or whatever we've tried so long and so hard to be so certain about. Our certainty, our religious orthodoxy and righteousness – that too can become our cloak, so that when we stand face to face with Jesus and he says "What do you want me to do for you?", all we have to say is "I sure hope you're going to meet up to my very precise expectations." Just imagine if Jesus turned out to be less correct than us.

We may have made for ourselves a cloak of social righteousness, where we've managed to boycott all the right things, avoid eating all the wrong things, correct everyone when we catch them using insensitive or inappropriate language, and know exactly what kind of footprint we're leaving on precisely which part of the ozone layer. What will we say to Jesus when he asks "What do you want me to do for you?" Will we find ourselves saying, "With all due respect, Jesus, it's time you changed the car you drive?"

We're all different and we all have different challenges and different temptations. But here's one last cloak I think maybe a lot of us have. It's the tendency to think of the Christian faith as some kind of life assurance package, that doesn't require a great deal of us in our lifetime other than a verbal assent and a monthly or biweekly deduction from our pay packet. It needs a bit of adjustment when there's a major family life transition, like a wedding or a funeral, but otherwise it just ticks over like a useful but unobtrusive insurance policy, lifting anxiety about the future and making it easier to plan for the unknown. We live in a corporate world, and we're used to delegating the complex parts of our lives to the professionals: how convenient to get God to handle the eternal life contract. When Jesus says to us, "What do you want me to do for you?", we'll just say, "Give me what I've paid good money for."

If we remotely recognize ourselves in any of these descriptions, or if family or nation or anything else has become our cloak, the story of Bartimaeus is saying one simple thing to us today. It's time to shed the cloak. Making such a cloak for ourselves amid the uncertainty of life and the fear of death is understandable. Keeping such a cloak as our source of identity and security is a very common thing to do. But if we truly want to meet Jesus face to face, if we long to leap up in delight and joy because we've put our trust in no one and nothing but him, *it's time to shed the cloak.*

Imagine Jesus calling you from the other side of a fast-flowing river. You're wearing the cloak, your precious, carefully customized cloak. He's calling you by name and you start to cross the water, still wearing the cloak. You go deeper and deeper, and the cloak is getting heavier and heavier, and anyone watching could see that if you don't shed the cloak it's not just that you won't see Jesus, you won't even make land on either bank. I wonder whether that's where you are today. I wonder whether that's where you are right now.

It's time to shed the cloak. It's time to part with the insulation, to dispense with the insurance package that prevents you from coming face to face with Jesus. The rich young man wouldn't part with his money. That was his cloak. James and John wouldn't part with their longing for status. That was theirs. It's time to shed the cloak. God shed his, when he came naked among us in a manger in Bethlehem, when he hung naked before us on a cross outside Jerusalem. He shed his cloak because he wanted so desperately to stand before us. It's time for us to shed ours, so we can stand before him. It's time to shed the cloak.

Why must we shed the cloak? Because Jesus is going to ask us, "What do you want me to do for you?" And if we're all bound up in the cloak we're going to be very limited indeed in the range of answers we're going to be able to give him. In particular, we're going to find it impossible to give the answer Jesus wants to hear. We're not going to leap up in joy like the blind beggar, we're going to find ourselves dreading the conversation.

When Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?", Bartimaeus simply says, "Let me see again." Think about what these words really mean. Bartimaeus is saying to Jesus, "I want you to change my identity." Bartimaeus is blind, and he's a beggar. That's what he is and how he makes a living. When he begins to see he loses his identity as a blind man and his security of income as a person others feel obligated to help. He's stepping into the unknown: a world he can't begin to imagine.

Small wonder we don't want to shed the cloak. Because then we'd be stepping into the unknown. We'd find ourselves standing before Jesus and saying what Bartimaeus said. "I ... want ... you ... to ... give ... me ... a ...new ... identity. I want to become what only you can make me. I want to open my eyes and enter a whole new reality – like a blind man opening his eyes to see the world for the first time. Let me into that world. Please Jesus! Please Jesus: I'm leaving my cloak behind. I realize now it's useless. Let ... me ... into ... your ... world!"

After the chief executive left my house all those years ago, I found myself with an audio cassette in my hand. I made my way to the tape player and slotted it in. I heard on the tape the sound of my visitor clearing his throat, in a rather self-conscious way. Then there was a long silence. Then he cleared his throat again. And then to my astonishment I heard this proud man begin to sing a simple song. "I have decided... to follow Jesus. I have decided ... to follow Jesus. I have decided... to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."