

BLIND FAITH? "YOUR FAITH HAS HEALED YOU" IN THE HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS: THE STORY OF BLIND BARTIMAEUS (MARK 10:46-52).

Introduction

One of the key features of the 'kingdom of God' inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth is the visible sign of victory over the forces of darkness in the form of physical healing. The gospel of Mark has 11 such healing stories, two of which include the enigmatic saying of Jesus: 'Your faith has healed you'¹.

At face value, the story of Blind Bartimaeus is a simple healing story demonstrating Jesus' compassion for the poor and oppressed. Closer inspection reveals a pericope loaded with historical, pastoral and theological significance leading many scholars to view it as a post-Easter invention articulating tenets of Early Church dogma.

Bultmann² saw its 'novelistic' quality leading to this conclusion and modern authors such as Joel Marcus read into it an early baptismal rite played out in dramatic fashion³.

In contrast, recent scholarship has tended to affirm the story's historical genesis, albeit with redactive and narrative embellishment typical of the Evangelist. This renewed sense of historicity makes the story of Bartimaeus one worthy of attention, particularly for the light it sheds on the nature of faith and how belief in Jesus and his mission allows the powers of the age to come to break into the present.

The phrase 'Your faith has healed you' sharpens the link between the words and works of Jesus and the response of the petitioner. But what does this phrase mean? What does it tell us about the nature of faith and salvation? And what does Bartimaeus teach those who hold that God still heals today and even to those that don't?

¹ The other story being the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:24-34.

² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 41.

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou, 2009), 765.

Background

Most commentators agree that the Bartimaeus story occupies a significant position within Mark's gospel. It is the last of the Marcan healings and sits immediately prior to the 'Jesus in Jerusalem' narrative section. Bartimaeus' ability to 'see' who Jesus is, is set in contrast to the relative confusion of the disciples (Mark 8:27-33) and bookends the so-called 'discipleship' section that begins with the healing of another blind man in Mark 8:22-26.

Where differences emerge, particularly among form critics such as Achtermeier⁴ and Menken⁵, is whether this is a miracle story at all. Some suggest it is a 'call story', exhibiting similar features to other call stories such as the call of the first disciples. Others detect a lesson about discipleship and the cost of following Jesus. Still others see the christological significance of the story, particularly the progression of names or terms used to refer to Jesus (namely Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of David and *Rabbouni*). Writers such as Robbins⁶ and Bailey see a well-crafted story combining many such elements with the latter arguing that Middle Eastern readers would also appreciate the rhetorical device (a form of inverted parallelism) used in the story⁷.

Few writers seek to clarify what the phrase 'your faith has healed you' means. As MacNutt puts it "Prayer for healing is more associated with the tents than with theological seminaries."⁸ However, this does not mean that modern scholarship rejects the notion of physical healing as an experiential reality. Wright claims that "Few serious historians now deny that Jesus, ... , performed cures and did other startling things for which there was no obvious natural explanation."⁹ Vermes casts Jesus in the role of itinerant charismatic holy man, similar to Jewish miracle workers present in the final two centuries before the fall of the Temple.¹⁰

⁴ P. J. Achtemeier, "'And he followed him': Miracles and discipleship in Mark 10:46-52." *Semeia* 11, (1978), 115-145.

⁵ Maarten J.J. Menken, "The call of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)." *HTS Theologische Studies/Theological Studies*, 61(1&2), (2005), 273-290.

⁶ Vernon K. Robbins, "The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus in the Marcan Theology." *JBL*, 92, 2 (1992).

⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. (London: SPCK, 2008), 171.

⁸ Francis MacNutt, *Healing*. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 136.

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (London: SPCK, 1996), 188.

¹⁰ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historians Reading of the Gospels*. (London: SCM Press, 1992).

In his extensive analysis of healing stories in the gospels, Meier concludes that the Bartimaeus pericope stands as "one of the strongest candidates for the report of a specific miracle going back to the historical Jesus."¹¹

Exegesis

To appreciate how the phrase would have been understood by the original readership, we must (a) understand the key words for faith (*pistis*) and healed/saved (*sesoken*) and (b) examine how Bartimaeus exhibited the attributes of faith.

(a) Key words

The key words at play here are the word for faith (*pistis*) and the word for healed (*sozo*, also translated 'saved').

Pistis means 'trust, faithfulness'. The related OT word for 'to believe' is *he'min*, the basic meaning of the root '*mn* being 'firm, constant, reliable'¹². Interestingly, Jeremias notes that "'*mn* denotes the carrying of a child in the folds of a garment or on the hips because it is safe and sheltered there"¹³. The word *pistis* developed over time in meaning such that in the Synoptics, it is taken to mean "trust in the mission of Jesus and his power to deliver from trouble"¹⁴. Marcus deepens the personal connotation of the word as "not just intellectual assent but emotional involvement and commitment"¹⁵.

Sesoken/Sozo means 'to save'¹⁶. The root meaning of *sozo* is 'to rescue from danger', translated variously 'healed' or 'saved' depending on the context. Marcus extends this analysis saying "it means eschatological deliverance by God from the sufferings of the end time or of the realm of the dead."¹⁷ So Bartimaeus, like the

¹¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 690.

¹² Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology, Vol 1*. (London: SCM Press, 1971), 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁴ O. Michel, "Faith" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Exeter: Paternoster, 1975). 587-601, p.599-600.

¹⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou, 2009), 360.

¹⁶ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 174.

¹⁷ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 366.

woman with the issue of blood, and Jairus' daughter all experience in their bodies 'the power of God's new age'.

Together, *pistis* and *sesoken* combine to develop the idea that the faith Jesus is looking for is 'trust in spite of appearances' or for Bartimaeus, recognition of Jesus and his saving mission despite his physical condition and material poverty. Wright summarises this faith by defining it as a 'crucial part of the definition of Israel at her time of great crisis'.¹⁸ Whether applied personally or nationally, Jesus is seen to call disciples to 'boundless faith', being open to the 'unlimited possibilities' that God presents.¹⁹

(b) *Bartimaeus' example of faith*

How does Bartimaeus demonstrate this 'trust in spite of appearances'? Three key aspects are highlighted here: (i) his persistence²⁰, (ii) his verbal acknowledgement of Jesus' messianic status and (iii) his willingness to give up everything to follow Jesus.

Bartimaeus' persistence is demonstrated in the almost comical interplay with the crowd²¹. He will not be held back despite the crowd's rude order to 'shut up!'²² Jesus vindicates him by stopping (in itself a key development) and commanding the crowd to call him forth, turning them into the king's courtiers in the process²³. Persistence proves fruitful, it demonstrates a serious will to engage the healer who responds in kind.

Names are important in this story and Bailey translates the patronymic Bartimaeus from Aramaic to mean 'Son of Filth'²⁴. As already mentioned, Bartimaeus utilises a range of names when addressing Jesus, the most significant being Son of David (a messianic title) and *Rabbouni* (an Aramaic word for teacher with deeper significance than the more common, Rabbi). In his blind state, Bartimaeus is the first person in

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (London: SPCK, 1996), 260.

¹⁹ Michel, *Faith*, 600.

²⁰ R. McL. Wilson, "Mark." in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (ed. by M. Black and H.H. Rowley; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1962), pages 799-819.

²¹ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 764.

²² Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173. Bailey notes the Marcan use of strong language, in this case *siopao*, an ingressive aorist literally meaning 'shut your mouth'.

²³ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173.

²⁴ This is disputed by those that translate the Greek patronymic Timaeus as 'son of honour'.

the synoptic gospels other than the disciples to acknowledge publically the true identity of Jesus.

It should be noted that in all this, the reader/hearer would come to one clear conclusion. Despite what Jesus says to Bartimaeus, it is the power of God at work in and through him (Jesus) that is significant. In addition to the eschatological implications of the 'Son of David' title, Dunn points out the expectation of healing associated with David and Solomon.²⁵ Furthermore, any hope for a prophet in the Moses or Elijah mould included 'expectation of great natural wonders or amazing healings'.²⁶ Bartimaeus would presumably have been aware of Isaiah 35:5 or even Isaiah 61:1-3, used by Jesus himself to inaugurate his ministry in Luke 4:18-19 (although, tellingly, not in Mark). The Messiah would most definitely be a healer, in whatever form he came.

Finally, Bartimaeus 'throws off' his old life as a professional beggar and follows Jesus on the way. That way or road would have been rich pickings for him since it was located on the pilgrim's route to Jerusalem²⁷. Bailey explains that in Middle Eastern society, beggars provide a 'service' to the wealthy wishing to demonstrate their piety with alms to the poor. His blindness is his qualification, his livelihood and to follow Jesus and receive his sight is actually to throw away his only means of support. Trusting in Jesus for him was, to quote Bonhoeffer, no 'cheap grace'.²⁸

Homiletics

Faith today has somehow become defined as "belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence."²⁹ This is certainly not how the Evangelist or his readers would understand faith. Faith may be '*trust in spite of appearances*' but it is certainly not based on lack of evidence. Rather the opposite, it takes into account the evidence of what is seen, heard and experienced.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), section 15.7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, section 15.7.

²⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*. (London: SCM Press, 1969), .

²⁸ Bailey, *JTMEE*, 173.

²⁹ Richard Dawkins quoted in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 84.

But one might retort, "Can you rely on such ancient texts, so clearly influenced by a community that wants you to believe this stuff?" As we have seen, many eminent historians beg to differ. Bauckham makes a compelling case for the eyewitness account of Bartimaeus, one who would have been well known in the Jerusalem church stating "Mark could expect his readers to know of Bartimaeus as a kind of living miracle"³⁰ and that "Bartimaeus will have been telling his story to anyone who would listen doubtless from the start."³¹

Historicity, however, is not the main lesson regarding faith from this study. What we see is that faith or trust in the person of Jesus combines persistence, costly commitment, emotional involvement as well as intellectual assent to who Jesus is. Borg claims the idea of 'believing' has undergone a 'radical change of meaning' in the last four hundred years.³² Contrasted with the current predominant paradigm of 'faith as dogma', pre-modern English has belief meaning a relationship of *trust, loyalty and love*, or as Borg puts it 'to believe meant to belong'. This sounds more like the definition of the faith of the gospels.

Bartimaeus didn't just believe truths 'about' Jesus, he believed 'into' Jesus to the extent that he was willing to trust him for his future whatever it may hold. Whether he knew quite where that trust would take him, to Jerusalem and beyond, is not known. We can be reasonably certain however, that he was rewarded for his faith with his sight and that he continued post-cross and resurrection to tell what the Lord had done for him.

Our final thoughts relate to the ministry of healing in today's church. MacNutt tells how the Catholic Church is rediscovering the sacrament of anointing the sick with remarkable results³³. He now sees healing as a normative expectation, a progression from a belief that only the 'saints' or especially blessed individuals can administer healing. His experience allows him to relay some key lessons about faith and healing:

³⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

³² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 20-21.

³³ MacNutt, *Healing*.

1. His faith is in God to do the healing. It is not faith in one's own faith that counts. This helps avoid unhelpful emphases on the individual themselves. As Mark tells us, although Jesus makes the ironic suggestion that it is Bartimaeus' faith that has healed him, it is clear that it is still the power of God found in Jesus that effects the healing.

2. MacNutt mentions an important but rarely discussed theological concept: *immanence*³⁴. God is not 'out there' somewhere, an external force to be invoked. Rather He is close by, near to us and able to heal from the inside. This seems to resonate with the idea of faith as a close, trusting relationship and not simply assent to a particular set of ideas or truths.

3. The healing ministry emphasis is on love, not power. Much criticism and concern about healing ministry stems from an apparently unhealthy focus on the 'power of God to heal' rather than on 'the love (or compassion) of God to heal'. Ken Sarles makes this point in his critique of the Wimber 'power evangelism' movement³⁵. Wimber and the subsequent Vineyard movement would doubtless agree with Sarles that it is a fair point and vital reminder to all that would pursue prayer for healing.

Blind faith?

The themes of faith and healing are broad and deep and the story of Bartimaeus reveals a richness of content and meaning. In arguing for historicity and reaching for truth beneath the layers of this content, it is easy to forget that this is very much a story about a poor, blind beggar that received something very precious to him, something that he probably once had and lost to poverty: his eyesight. It is hoped that we too can join with those early eyewitnesses in appreciating the beauty of sight and the opportunity to see the face of the One who said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁵ Ken L. Sarles, An Appraisal of the Signs and Wonders Movement. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 145, (Jan 1988), 78.

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