**Sermon for 25th May 2022: Healing. Service for Women in Fellowship at Netley Hall.**

When Mark Oakley and I met a few months ago we agreed that one of the pre-requisites of any healing is the presence of empathy. He then told me about the clergyman who went to a Crematorium to take a funeral service. As he walked in to check everything was ready for the service a young man approached him. ‘Vicar’ he said, ‘do you know the WIFI password for this building?’ Rather taken aback the Vicar replied: ‘Have some respect for your mother.’ ‘Is that all in lower case?’ asked the man.

Well, I doubt I can match Mark’s humour or eloquence but I want to begin by saying that in a world desperate for healing the role of the Church is to provide entertainment. Entertainment functions in a very interesting way. It has the power to hold the attention and draw together a diverse and sometimes divided audience and to give them a sense of unity and harmony they would not otherwise possess. The word ‘entertain’ comes from two Latin words ‘inter’ and ‘tenere’ so it literally means ‘to hold between’. To entertain is to span the empty spaces in our human experience that cause alienation. It is an attempt to keep together what has become fragmented and splintered. It is about standing in the gaps which are so often marked by pain, loss and bewilderment and staying there even against the odds. Staying there as a way of acknowledging the hurt, a way of saying ‘This matters and this need healing’. To entertain is to weave threads of connection across the fissures that so often exist in our hearts and minds as we negotiate failure, regret and missed opportunity. It will also have some bearing on the disconnectedness we increasingly feel between ourselves and the natural environment which we have exploited so thoughtlessly and for so long. As we contemplate the brokenness of our humanity we need entertainers, people who get between those or that which is separated, releasing the power of love deeply into hearts and minds and thereby cauterizing their wounds so that they do not finally bring dissolution and destruction.

And in the execution of this entertainment none of us has the vantage point of an observer; we are all, believer and non-believer alike, caught up in the trauma of being pulled apart by forces both inside and outside ourselves. We know that we must all accept some measure of culpability for the way things are. As G.K Chesterton put it in a letter to ‘The Times’ when it invited correspondence on the subject, ‘What’s Wrong with the World?’ ‘Dear Sir’, he wrote. ‘I am. Yours sincerely, G.K.Chesterton.’ All of us must hold up our hand and admit that we need healing and that when we seek to offer relief to others we do so as ‘wounded healers’.

So lets turn to the story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10 v 46-end, to see more fully just how much we need to be entertained, and thereby healed.

The place where Jesus encountered the blind man speaks volumes about the dysfunctionality of human society towards the vulnerable and the sick. Jesus met him ‘as they were leaving the city’. He was not welcome inside the city where he would be an embarrassment and an awkward reminder that nothing was being done to help or support him. He had been marginalised, pushed out of sight, so that the urban community could expend its energy on more ‘worthwhile’ pursuits. It is no surprise to learn therefore that he was called ‘Bartimaeus’ – which means ‘Son of Timaeus’. His first name was not known; he was an anonymous figure, a category, a statistic, a non-person.

The Old Testament had taught that the *‘ger’* a Hebrew word meaning ‘stranger’, ‘alien’, ‘one who is different from us’ should be treated with honour. But Jewish society in Jesus’ time – like most other societies before and since - had the knack of ignoring such ideals, (and the documents which commend them), and sticking doggedly to a way marked by exaltation of health, youth, beauty and selfish indulgence. So, the nameless beggar ends up on a dusty roadside begging for any handouts that would enable him to scrape a paltry existence. Such people need advocates, those prepared to raise the voice of protest and stand in the gap between them and the powerful trend-setters and policymakers of society. Their right to be visible and valued in the mainstream of life must constantly be put back on the political agenda.

But we are not done with the scene beyond the city gate because surrounding Jesus, and attentive to his teaching, is a crowd, a crowd which with a moment’s thought, has an uncomfortable resemblance to the church. I say ‘uncomfortable’ because the crowd acts no differently to society. When Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus we read that ‘many rebuked him and told him to be quiet.’ They could have been a bridge between Bartimaeus and Jesus, helping him to his feet and guiding him in the right direction. Instead they were a barrier. They saw him as a nuisance who threatened to interrupt their privileged audience with Jesus and we suddenly recognize an ugly disconnect between the teaching they hear from him and the deeds they put into practice.

There was once a spine-chilling moment in the archives of the Vatican when the Pope was showing the great 13th Century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, the treasures that had been accumulated over the centuries. ‘No longer like the apostles John and Peter do we need to say ‘Silver and gold have I none’ said the Pope with a wry smile. ‘But nor can it say like the apostles John and Peter ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth be healed and walk’ replied the humble monk with a tear in his eye. Entertainment in such a situation means reminding a church which depends on material power to learn afresh how to depend on spiritual power as in each generation it seeks to continue on earth the healing work of Jesus.

And that is the point we now reach in the story of Bartimaeus. Despite the noisy hustle and bustle of the crowd Jesus hears the lone voice of the beggar and heeds it. When he comes out into the open there falls from Jesus’ lips one of those heart-stopping questions that punctuate the Gospel narratives*: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’*

I’ve no doubt that each of us could profit greatly from pondering that question long and hard: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ As for Bartimaeus he answers without hesitation. ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’ The bedraggled beggar knows that what separates him from earning a living, enjoying marriage and parenthood – and all the other experiences which gave a 1st Century Jew dignity and a sense of worth - was his blindness. So Jesus entertains Bartimaeus. He enters the gap and creates a bridge to a more fulfilling life. ‘Your faith has healed you’ he tells him – and he restores his sight.

What is hidden in this healing narrative is the profound cost of being an entertainer, one who takes hold of what has been prised apart by sin, evil or misfortune and draws them back into harmony and wholeness. To catch a glimpse of that costliness we must turn to another event in the life of Jesus: the Cross. In his poem, *The Musician*, R. S. Thomas interprets Jesus’ suffering through the medium of entertainment.

A memory of Kreisler once:

At some recital in this same city,

The seats all taken, I found myself pushed

On to the stage with a few others,

So near that I could see the toil

Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth

Fluttering under the fine skin,

And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,

Caught temporarily in art’s neurosis,

As we sat there or warmly applauded

This player who so beautifully suffered

For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary

In the fiercer light of the thorns’ halo:

The men standing by and that one figure,

The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,

Making such music as lives still.

And no one daring to interrupt

Because it was himself that he played

And closer than all of them the God listened.

Through Jesus, God absorbs all the pain and rupture of an unhealed world – and from it God creates something as harmonious as music. Out of the holocaust of suffering that the Cross instantiates there comes something beautiful, something which entertains, something which points to the possibility of healing.

And the clue as to what makes this possible is solidarity. God’s willingness to express solidarity with our human predicament. God reveals himself as the entertainer who is present on the ‘crowded stage’ of humanity whose sacrificial music enters the hearing of all who listen and who then begin to discern the rhythm of a new tune.

If as followers of Jesus we want to become instruments of peace and agents of healing we too must immerse ourselves in the life of humanity with all its gaping fissures and fragmentation and be prepared to take the strain and expend the cost of being present and accessible to those alienated from others or from themselves.

One of the finest demonstrations of how solidarity heals is found in the *L’Arche* or Ark communities founded by Jean Vanier. These communities consist of able-minded and able-bodied individuals living in close contact with others who are disabled in mind or body. Through sharing their lives together – in work and leisure and prayer – they discover a quality of life that would otherwise not be possible. And it is not just the more vulnerable members who benefit – all parties testify that the experience brings transformation and healing. But the particular story I want to share with you concerns Jean-Pierre whose mind and body were damaged by a traumatic birth.

His parents rejected him and he spent most of his youth going from one institution to another, until he joined L’Arche community. There he found for the first time that he was cherished, that his contribution to the common life was valued, and that his future was secure. One day Jean-Pierre went to the seaside and as he stepped on to the beach his companion Claude, said: ‘Jean-Pierre draw a picture of a house.’ So he drew a simple square with a door and windows on the sand. ‘Now draw the sun’: a big round circle appeared surrounded by straight lines. The final request was a bit different:’ Jean-Pierre draw a picture of joy!’ The young man looked one way along the extensive beach and then turned and looked the other way. He sighed and then said: ‘There isn’t enough room!’

Healing had brought joy into Jean-Pierre’s life – a joy he could not depict or describe but which had transformed his life. He knew he was on the path to wholeness – and it was the loving solidarity of his companions which had made that possible. With whom might you and I express that kind of solidarity so that both we – and they – experience healing?

On the Cross we see the horizontal beams and across them the outstretched arms of Jesus connecting with those who cry out for justice, reconciliation and peace. But the other beam of the cross is vertical, pointing upwards to God and reminding us that the power to go on healing and helping in our wounded world comes from the divine cascade of unconquerable love and compassion that flows into our midst through Jesus.

We cannot do the work of healing in our own strength and we do not need to. In the presence of God we can find an infinite desire to heal, forgive, restore and strengthen. So I want to invite each and everyone of you, as a members of Women in Fellowship, to become entertainers: to hold in creative, costly tension all who need healing and hope. In doing that to be open to God’s guidance as you engage lovingly with this present world, and as you also look hopefully towards an eternity filled with God’s shalom and God’s irrepressible joy.

Amen