

Sunday between 23rd and 29th October [30]

Mark 10: 46-52

Have you ever noticed how before Jesus performs healings he usually asks the person in need of healing whether or not they actually want to be healed, or he asks the obviously distressed person approaching him what it is they want? That is the scenario in today's gospel, a blind man, Bartimaeus, shouts at Jesus, son of David have mercy on me. He gets shushed by those around him but he shouts out all the more, son of David have mercy on me. Now it is likely that as the man was being brought to Jesus his blindness would have been apparent, even if his appearance did not give it away, his need to be led would have done as they were in a crowd and Jesus was one of many people this blind man could hear.

Yet Jesus doesn't just restore the man's sight, he asks first what it is the man wants from him. It was the same in the story of the healing of the man at the pool in Bethzatha, where the man had laid for 38 years. Once again Jesus asked the man "Do you want to be healed". It seems a crazy question but Jesus asked it anyway. Why, then, does Jesus ask such a question rather than just doing a wonderful, charitable thing for a person so clearly in need? Surely giving to charity and being charitable towards others is a good thing, we would all agree on that. The difficulty lies with who receives our charity and the way in which they feel about it.

You may be familiar with the film *The Railway Children* and if not, it is a wonderful film to look up. In the story there is a scene where the children decide to mark the birthday of the railway signal man, Albert Perks, at their local station who is very kind to them. They plan to have a party for him and they ask others in the village who also appreciate the man's kindness to offer gifts to show that appreciation. The children gather the things together, take it to the man's home much to the surprise and delight of his wife and their children and yet when he arrives, Perks is not delighted, rather he is offended that those around him might think he needs charity and sees that as the motivation for the many gifts.

If this were case, charity would have been a very bad thing indeed, a patronising gesture designed to undermine the individual it was meant to help. In the film it all gets straightened out but in the real world we have to tread carefully.

People are more willing to give charitably than to receive and perhaps there are two reasons for that. One might be that as in the case of Perks, some feel inferior by the grand gestures of others, however well intentioned. Perhaps it was with this in mind that Jesus never performed a miracle or act of charity without engaging with the one to benefit, without asking first what would make that person better, happier, strengthened, to be certain that his act wasn't misconstrued or led to the person feeling patronised or out of control. It's lovely to surprise someone with something nice but sometimes it's better to identify what they need and fulfil that need.

The second reason we are less willing to receive charity than to give is that perhaps we don't think we need it. Perhaps we feel blessed by our lives and our homes and our families and our possessions so much that we can't imagine needing anyone to be offering charity to us. We are willing and keen to share with others because we have a surplus and there is nothing that can be offered to us in return.

It's certainly true when we look at the wider world that whatever struggles we have are difficult to compare with our fellow human beings across the globe. We talk of austerity measures that are making our lives more financially challenging, but we are not struggling to have clean water to drink and our children are not left without medical care when they become ill with the everyday childhood ailments that affect us all.

So perhaps it is true that the charitable sharing of wealth is a one-way street, something we can offer in differing degree to those massively disadvantaged in their lives compared to us. Yet an attitude of pride in the face of charity can affect how we react to the not material acts of charity that are directed towards us too, but so often these acts of kindness and charity are things we all need.

As Jesus offered his healing touch as his charitable response to the blind man so are we liable to be touched by Christ through the charitable words, actions and gestures of others if we will let them respond to the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

How often are we struggling with something and a kind hand makes contact and a kind smile looks towards us and kind words speak to ask if we need any help, but our gut reaction is to say, "I'm fine". So concerned to not show any sign of weakness, to show how very capable we are of managing all the things life throws at us we dare not let our guard down, not even in response to charity we know we need.

And if we do that with the people around us, how much more do we do that with God. God waits for us to call out in prayer, God waits for the opportunity to ask us the question "What do you want me to do for you?" we must remember to let God in, to share our troubles, to be willing to receive God's most excellent gift of charity.

Because not only do we need it, not only do we have to acknowledge that we need it but by receiving it we can truly understand that gift of charity in its purest form, the free gift, by grace, that God gives to us. And in understanding this gift better we are better able to share it with those around us, those who need us to offer a kind word, a kind smile, the touch of a hand in response to Christ. And to offer to those even beyond our day to day lives the gift of material charity, a real gift for people who need it, who have asked for it which restores dignity and self-sufficiency to those who otherwise would depend on the undermining, patronising charity that has sometimes been offered in the past.

As you reflect on Jesus' kindness through charity, how might that affect your own life, perhaps there are issues you need help with, that you can request from others and from God. Casting all our cares on Jesus, may we each be as full of faith as Bartimaeus was in his encounter with Christ.