

30th Sunday (B)

27th October 2024

‘Down Jericho way’

Jer 31: gathering in the blind and the lame Ps 125: *Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage*
Heb 5: Christ the high priest
Mk 10: 46–52: *his sight returned and he followed Him along the road*

I had lunch with a friend yesterday and was reminded that six years ago exactly, we were in the Holy Land together — my most recent pilgrimage there, as sadly, owing to the war I was unable to make my expected trip with Newman-House students Easter Week this year. Those days in the Holy Land in Oct 2018 included wonderful experiences at Nazareth, Lake Galilee, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. I didn’t have a chance to re-visit then the ancient city of Jericho, down in the Jordan valley, east of Jerusalem, beyond the Judaeian wilderness — it’s reckoned to be *the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world*, existing since c. 10,000 BC. It’s also extraordinary in another way, being the *lowest city on earth*, 258m below sea level! In Jesus’s time Jewish pilgrims from Galilee would typically have travelled south along the fertile Jordan valley, and when they reached Jericho would have begun the long ascent of 20 miles west, up to the Holy City of Jerusalem.

It’s a climb of 1000m, and as they made this last effort on their pilgrimage they would sing the *psalms of ascent*. These 15 psalms of pilgrimage (Pss 119–33) accompanied their joyous final day’s walking as they came in sight of Jerusalem, especially awesome if they approached the Holy City over the Mt of Olives. “*I rejoiced when I heard them say, ‘Let us go to God’s house,’ and now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!*” (Ps 121). We had another of the psalms of ascent today for the response between 1st & 2nd Readings, Ps 125: “*When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage, it seemed like a dream; then was our mouth filled with laughter, on our lips there were songs.*” There was always such a great joy associated with those making that uphill turn at Jericho into the wilderness, as Jerusalem, the sacred hill of Mt Zion, was within reach now, the pilgrims’ blessed destination.

Our Lord Jesus, in his travels back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem, would often have gone by way of Jericho, (though we also know that He sometimes took the less-favoured route via the land of the Samaritans, not so

welcoming to Jewish pilgrims). A number of incidents famous in the Gospel happen in Jericho, as well as its being the setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan. *Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus*, a rich and fraudulent tax collector, occurred here — in fact there is a much-visited sycamore tree in Jericho today to commemorate the event. Then there's *today's Gospel passage*, in which blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the Jericho roadside, appeals to Jesus, pleading loudly with Him to be healed. It may seem on the surface that this is just one more of countless healings that Jesus performed in His ministry, but the key to this one is that Bartimaeus having been healed promptly *follows Jesus along the road*. He could not, having received his sight, simply return to an aimless drop-out's life in Jericho. No, having had that touch of the living God, having 'seen the light,' He is duty bound to become a disciple, to want to follow, adore and be with Jesus.

This becomes even more significant when one realises that the very next event in the Gospel of Mark (ch. 11) is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Our Lord's time

in Jericho when he heals Bartimaeus is the prelude to His final ascent to the Holy City of Jerusalem. He is coming towards His time of Passion and death: His healing, His teaching, His authority, and His self-giving are all coming to a climax. To be a disciple now is to be prepared to be associated with one who in a few short weeks (or even days) will be condemned and crucified. Bartimaeus perhaps senses this; He calls Jesus specifically 'Son of David' which is to say, 'Messiah' / the Christ. Maybe this is why Bartimaeus is so eager to be healed and to receive His sight; He wants to follow Jesus on the road, to witness Jesus's final great acts of loving sacrifice in Jerusalem. He wants to be there; he wants to see these terrific world-changing events of Jesus's Entry into Jerusalem hailed as Messiah; and His glorious Holy Week, Passion, and Easter.

If we are also to see the joyous *glory of Jesus* shining out of these historical events of His, then we too need to *have our eyes opened*. We need to see that the most important days in the history of humanity, and of all creation, are those in which Our Lord Jesus gave Himself

up for us: in the Eucharist of Holy Thursday, and on the bloodied Cross the day after, in Jerusalem, the City of David. We can't be appealing to the Lord for His healing, His blessings, and His gifts ... if we are not also to make that commitment to following Him along the road, climbing that long uphill effort — as if from Jericho to Jerusalem towards the Cross — accepting some sacrifice. We can't just sit on the side and expect the Lord's blessings to fall into our lap with nothing demanded of us. When our eyes are opened, and when by His gift we see that all things come from Him for our wellbeing, then we must exercise ourselves, make that wholehearted commitment to Jesus, and follow Him with no turning back. Of course Jesus wants to heal us of our infirmities, but He doesn't want just to see us sat idly afterwards, letting Him recede into the distance. His gifts, His graces, His blessing should *get us on our feet*, hurrying to be with Him every day, close by, absolutely committed disciples.

Here at Newman House — here at university, here at this point in your young-adult lives — this is when to have

your eyes opened by Jesus. Alongside other important life goals at university — pursuing your academic and artistic interests; pondering your career, your vocation; and cementing life-long friendships — the most important of all is to cement your eternal-life-long friendship with Jesus, and to follow Him along the road. If you're sat on the side of the road, unsure whether to follow Him more closely, in an absolute committed sense, then ... what is it you need healing of first? ... what is stopping you from getting up? ... what is keeping your eyes closed? ... what is the block to a 100% commitment to Jesus? You know what to do, don't you? — you need to cry out with all your soul, with the trust that Bartimaeus had, “Son of David, have pity on me!” And if you get the shrug-off from those around you who would not convey you to Jesus Christ, then you cry out *all the louder*, “Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me!” He's not deaf to your cries; He *wants* to heal you; He absolutely wants you by His side day and night; He wants to walk up that hill with you, out of the depths of Jericho towards glory. Here at Mass; and here in the quiet

of His presence in the Blessed Sacrament; and here in Confession; and here in the joy of other students' commitment to Christ, He will heal you of anything worrying you and preventing your drawing close to Him.

Finally ... to return to the theme of visiting the Holy Land. I had my Silver Jubilee celebrations a few weeks ago in St Albans. And those who attended were invited to contribute to the collection for an important charity, *The Friends of the Holy Land*, such that I was able afterwards to send them about £1800- towards their work. On the back of that, I received a thank-you letter from the CEO, and following that up I have invited him to give a talk here this Thursday. *The Friends of the Holy Land* have insiders' view into the current conditions for the Palestinian & Israeli Christians living in these war-torn times in the Holy Land. I feel that it is really important that we show our support for our Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Places at this time — and I only wish that I could travel there again to the sacred sites of God's people, and Our Blessed Lord's ministry ... but at this time

that is quite impossible. I do long for the day when I can go back to the Holy Land — perhaps with some of you — and to experience again the *terra sancta*, the holy ground on which Our Lord trod His path of suffering and glory.

Please come, on Thursday, to hear Brendan Metcalfe of *The Friends of the Holy Land*, as at this crucial time in the history of the peoples of Israel he has a lot to tell us about conditions 'on the ground' for them, and about the ways in which they are being supported by the charity. The talk will be on Thursday (31st) at 6.10pm, and is entitled, "*The Faithful Few, Devastated by War and Living with Fear and Apprehension: perspectives of Palestinian Christians of our Mother Church following the events of 7th October 2023*" — it's a mouthful, but I think you get the idea that it will provide an insight that we are all need of, impotent as we feel as outsiders-looking-in on the violence and terror that is being experienced by so many in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon and beyond. I think we at least owe it to our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land to have our eyes opened, and to be informed about their current plight.