

“Changing Attitudes: a sermon preached at Holy Covenant, Jamieson”

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My mother has just returned home to Melbourne after a visit to see her son and daughter-in-law. She is 82 not out, tough as an old boot and determined to bat on to complete her ton. As often happens when she visits, we reminisce a little on the changes that have occurred over her eight decades. She smiles self-deprecatingly as she admits to getting her grandchildren to teach her how to use text-messaging on her mobile phone. We also talk about changes in attitudes that have occurred in our family, in her, over that time.

I had left Michael Kirby’s memoirs — *A Private Life* — lying around. Mum picked it up and couldn’t put it down. She loved it. And then came the moment that signalled that another change was germinating. “You know”, she said, “Kirby’s relationship with Johan [Johan von Vloten, his partner], it’s just like a married couple.” And so, for my 82 year old mother, a major re-think of decades of assumption about marriage, an assumption reinforced by society and church, was under way, just as, earlier in life, she had changed in her attitude towards those who identified as gay or lesbian.

But for both my mother and me, there was a factor in attitude-formation that was even more powerful than society and church — my father, Harold. He was a dearly loved man, who died too young, at 52. As loved and loving as he was, he had some rigid sides. One of them was his attitude to gays and lesbians. The language that he used, the negativity, sending up and ridicule was what we might call “poofster-bashing”. And the way of the father was played out in his wife and his son, wedding with the entrenched dominant attitudes in society, church and school. For me especially, the church’s negativity provided the rationale, the ideological reinforcement of my father’s attitude.

But then, as I journeyed in the role of a priest, a slow-dawning discovery unfolded through my experience of gays and lesbians. They were — “My God!” — people of faith. They were — “My God!” — people of love and grace. And some came close to me, seeking sometimes counsel, sometimes blessing, sometimes just to share their story with me. It was as if they were saying, “Alan, son of Harold, have mercy on me.” A generational change was under way — in me.

And here, in today’s Gospel reading from Mark 10, is a blind man, Bartimaeus, one whose life had been framed by prejudice, affliction, ridicule. Indeed, he is so marginalized, that his only name seems to be defined by his father; he is only “son of Timaeus”. You can hear the pungent repudiation in the crowd gathered around Jesus — “shut up”, “stop making such a racket”, “do you have to make your presence so noticeable, so ‘out there’”. But all the more Bartimaeus refuses to be pushed out of mind, out of sight. In his own sight, perceived in blindness he cries out “Son of David” and “Have mercy on me”. This “Have mercy on me” is a refrain, the call of the Psalter. So many psalms, so many songs use the cry for the festivals in the temple. But Bartimaeus is not meant to have this faith, this temple piety. You see, Bartimaeus was not permitted to attend the temple. There was a generations-long prejudice against the blind and the lame that stretched all the way back to David the great King, the much loved king of Israel.

The story of this prohibition is found in the Hebrew Scriptures in the second book of Samuel. There in chapter 5 is related the story of the taking of Jerusalem by David and his troops. The Jebusites, proudly stationed on the walls of the city, sneered down from the ramparts at the besieging soldiers below. They yelled a particular taunt at David, “Even the blind and the lame could defend this place against you lot”. And so, when David did take the city, a pronouncement was made, a curse was laid “No one who is blind or lame shall enter the house, the temple” [cf Lev 21:18]. The story-teller even adds that David hates the blind and the lame. It’s why, in the story in Acts 3 of Peter and John going to the temple, the lame man is outside the gate, begging from those who can enter the temple. Now this repudiation, this making of outcasts, may be offensive to us but it is no different from the hatred of, the attitude towards gays and lesbians. What is worse, it is made sacred — it is tied to the place where God is to be worshipped. It is a religious ban.

So the cry for mercy has an added poignancy — it is about access, about attitudes. So often in the gospels, we find the temple language of faith coming from the lips, from the heart of those who are banned from the temple — people of faith such as Bartimaeus, or the Canaanite woman. Both are banned from the temple; yet both know the language of temple faith. Indeed they have a greater insight into the identity of Jesus than most around them. They cry for mercy.

And now that cry for mercy is addressed to a new generation. “Alan, son of Harold, have mercy on me.” “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me”. There is, as part of the faith being expressed, a deep-seated belief that the new generation does not have to be bound by the attitudes of those who have gone before. Change is possible.

And Jesus stops. He doesn’t address Bartimaeus directly, not at first. Rather he instructs the crowd — that group filled with prejudice and venom — to change their language, their attitude. “Call him”, Jesus says. And so the healing begins, not just of Bartimaeus but of the crowd. As Jesus calls the crowd to encounter Bartimaeus not just abuse him from a distance, a generational change is underway, where the past no longer is to determine the present, where the present is given the possibility of change, and where a new future can open up for those who have been withered by past vehemence and present reinforcement.

We need to see, need to breathe in, the significance of this generational change. Jesus enables Bartimaeus to see again and in so enabling him to see, enables him to enter the temple for the first time. But having been dismissed by Jesus, Bartimaeus joins the rest of the disciples as followers of the way, begins to express the faith that he already has had in a new and liberated expression. It is not just that Bartimaeus has received his sight, it is that the old categories of prejudice — blind, lame, poofter, whatever sort of labeling outcast — are themselves dismissed. Bartimaeus’ faith is affirmed by Jesus — he IS a follower of the way even as the crowd had pushed him to be beside the way, outside the way, outcast.

And this way of Jesus in Mark’s gospel has a sharp, destructive edge towards the religious institution of the day. In Mark’s gospel, when Jesus overturns the money-changers’ table, Jesus also drives out those who sell sacrificial animals AND those who buy. He is, as a number of scholars have recognized, parabolically, symbolically,

shutting down the religious institution that makes such outcasts. It has become, says Jesus, a cavern of robbers, terrorists [a meaning the Greek word is capable of bearing] when it should be welcoming all peoples [Mk 11:17]. This institution of prejudice, established under Davidic authority, is to be no more. And Bartimaeus joins the way of Jesus, not to return to the old ways of David now that he has escaped the ban but to be a follower of a new and living way.

And we, we are called to the same way, the same change of attitude. A generational change is being called for by Jesus, who himself lived just such a change. Yes, son of David, but a son who can overcome, overturn the curse and cursed attitude of the father's generation.